

PLEASE SIR, I WANT SOME MORE: INTENTIONALLY BIBLICAL COMMUNITY AND THE PUBLIC CAMPUS

by Michaela Lawrence

Abstract

Students everywhere are crying out for more: more money, more freedom and oftentimes more knowledge. Those of us who lead them must find ways to satisfy that hunger especially when they desire spiritual food. But of course, for every desire there is a challenge. Those attending public universities must contend with the blatant secular nature of their environs—we should get to know those environs. Those attending public colleges don't have spiritual formation built into their curriculum—we should provide them with meaningful options. And then we should do even more. "Feed my sheep," Jesus says and he doesn't tell us to stop. He wants us to give our students the spiritual food that will satisfy and grow them. "More food" must be part of the mantra. The "more" is intentionally biblical community—be it a traditional local church, a contemporary house church, a weekly small group, or some other fellowship. However it looks, it must be a space in which the truths of God as revealed in Scripture are explored, wrestled with, questioned and possibly answered. Spiritual transformation needs continual and intentional spiritual food.

Permit me to begin this discussion with an excerpt from an old novel. We find a group of orphan boys at the end of a meal but far from satisfied. And it's in this unfortunate state that one makes a daring move.

Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

"Please, sir, I want some more."

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder; the boys with fear.

"What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board was sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said,

"Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!"

There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

"For *more!*" said Mr. Limbkins. "Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?"

"He did, sir," replied Bumble.

"That boy will be hung," said the gentleman in the white waistcoat. "I know that boy will be hung."

Perhaps this is the first time you've been given the opportunity to compare the public campus students you minister to with Oliver Twist, the hungry child-thief who Charles Dickens uncovers in his nineteenth century novel. While we'd never admit to starving our students or treating them in any abusive manner, perhaps it's useful to see our students through the eyes of Oliver and his desperate companions, through the stomach that desires and deserves more. More what? More food. And for the purposes of this paper, more intentionally biblical community, a space in which the truths of God as revealed in Scripture are explored, wrestled with, questioned and possibly answered.

What Intentionally Biblical Community Looks Like

Being intentionally biblical is challenging in part because it means showing how biblical truths speak to the whole person. We sometimes spend so much time event-planning and relationship-counseling that we run out of time spent wrestling with ways to help students better appreciate the beauty of the Bible in a holistic and jargon free manner that teaches them to connect the dots of their spiritual experience instead of living compartmentalized lives.

Even though a thorough understanding of the Bible is not necessary for salvation, doctrine shouldn't remain an isolated list of good ideas. Doctrine reveals the truths of God. One of those truths is God's communal nature, his desire to live with us and see us grow as a people not simply as individuals. The existence of churches speaks to this reality.

Consequently, our ministry to public campus students should reflect the value of community, a community that meets the real needs and grows in its understanding of its Savior. It is imperative that we promote spiritual communal growth particularly as we live within a very self-centered and pluralistic culture. We will discuss more on that later. For now, let's return to food.

Supply and Demand

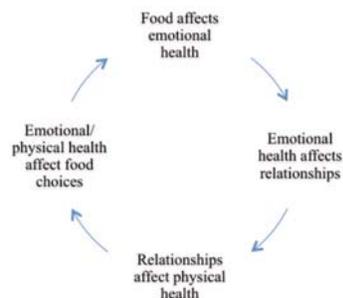
There's a point at which each of us finds our own food but initially, it must be given to us because we're too immature to know what we need to feed on. Left to our own devices, we'd likely starve or poison ourselves. So we must be fed and

gradually taught how to feed ourselves—and then others. If you have been fed, and perhaps fed for quite some time, it's time to move to the "feeding others" level. Our experience, gifts, skills, and varied careers have given us opportunities to do as Jesus tells Peter in John 21:17. "Feed my sheep." The Oxford Dictionary defines food as "any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb to maintain life and growth" and in this paper, I'd like to focus on that idea of maintaining life and growth.¹

So in other words, Christ is saying, "Peter, if you love me you will give my followers all they need to maintain life and growth." And then in verse 19 Jesus says, "Follow me." He gives no deadline for the feeding but instead says, "Do as I do." And as we have each experienced, Jesus never stops feeding us. Likewise, as those feeding others, our pots and pans should always be active.

Whether or not we've been able to recognize it as such, like Oliver we've experienced the ministry of food. In Oliver's case such nurture arrives in Chapter 11 when, after a sequence of dramatic events, the child becomes ill and is taken in by an old gentleman who provides him with the rest, comfort and nourishment he needs in order to live. Food moves Oliver from near death to life. Yet, we realize that in and of itself food does not minister to us. Calories are not spiritual. Rather, it is the hands that provide it, the heart that is willing to see loaves and fish multiplied, and the mouth that says "come on over" that work together to feed the hungry of which Jesus speaks. Food is an avenue for ministry. The food experience has the potential to minister to not only the physical body but to the emotions— one's very psyche is blessed. So when someone asks for more, we must not only pay attention, but seek ways to answer the request.

In his book *The Amazing Connection Between Food and Love*, Gary Smalley uses the following diagram.²



It proves an invaluable point: what we eat affects our whole person. And in his description of how food impacts our lives in this cyclical fashion, Smalley concludes that in order for us to achieve proper eating habits and enjoy a positive cycle we must each be in a relationship. One question quickly follows: How can I be in a relationship when I'm messed up? Smalley's answer is that the relationship we primarily need is a relationship with God. It is this relationship of prayer and Bible study that will enable us to be free from the negative cycle that is caused by poor eating habits.

As we talk about feeding others spiritually in a community setting, Smalley's diagram and conclusion aid our perspective. Most importantly, they point us to our ultimate need for God and when we think of spiritual food as something that's necessary to maintain life and growth, we see it in light of Smalley's diagram as essential to the whole person.

Location

Since we're talking about community, let's talk briefly about the actual physical locale of this shared spiritual experience. It's not imperative that students attend an actual church service each week because many who do are simply benchwarmers. So going to church merely out of habit is not something we necessarily want to encourage. What is essential is that students are part of a very intentional spiritual community. Because the traditional church setting has deep roots, traditions and a fairly solid system of programming already in place, it is situated to be a reliable center within which to foster spiritual growth. But intentionally biblical community can exist almost anywhere.

I don't want to dismiss the importance of the local church during college and university years in particular. As Benson Hines writes in his eBook *Reaching the Campus Tribes*, students "often remain entirely unnoticed by churches during those years. We should not be surprised at reports that 70% or more of our 'good youth group kids' are no longer connected to a church after a few years."³ So the local church does have a role to play in the spiritual nurture of our public campus students. However, I do want to speak in recognition of how church is being redefined. From small groups and coffee shops to simple church and other current spiritual

spaces, the fellowship of believers in worship is certainly a dynamic concept.⁴ What was once thought of as just a social gathering may have very well become a place to intentionally meet God. And these more contemporary places can certainly be found on public campuses.

The Time for More: Personal Testimony

So how do we know when it's time for more? Students will say so. They may not say it explicitly but they'll tell us—our job is to learn how to listen with both ears and eyes. They'll say things such as, "So Michaela, when are we coming over again? or "You know, I really miss my mum's baked macaroni."

Since when was my apartment so fabulous to look at for two hours? And since when did anyone love their mother's food just because it tastes good? Underlying each of these examples is the reality of fellowship. They had a good time with me and each other while at my place and they miss time spent with their family. Verbalizing these things to spiritual leaders is an often unconscious attempt to get more of the good experience. Community is desired. Encourage it!

And then there are the more complex questions and statements. "What does it really mean to be Adventist?" Many are making decisions based on their peer group. But many are truly looking for solid answers and making decisions based on the little they find wherever they find it. So we must pick up on their questions and find communal time during which to engage them. After all, one person's voiced question is often the silent question of three more.

While a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I took a class called *The Bible as Literature* to fulfill my English Literature requirements. This was my first encounter with texts such as the Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew Lexicon and ideas such as the Documentary Hypothesis. My professor was a Jewish, John Milton scholar who impressed me greatly when he said during one of our first sessions, "Now you students see through a glass darkly but one day..." And I was quite proud of the fact that unlike most of my classmates, I actually knew that he was quoting Scripture. I felt a momentary bond with my teacher. But that moment and all my Bible knowledge gave me a fleeting high.

One day we were discussing Genesis 18 where Abraham pleads with the Lord to spare Sodom and the Lord intimates that he'll change his mind based on certain variables. The possibility of the Lord changing his mind puzzled one of my classmates. So she asked, "Does that mean that this god figure is fallible?" I almost lost my mind. "Did she just call my God fallible?" Too shy to actually verbalize my disbelief I sat quietly, allowing time for follow-up questions to race through my head.

I soon learned that my teacher, though Jewish, wasn't fazed by the question and that this wasn't the space in which to seek resolution. This was a literature class. We were analyzing the Bible the same way we analyzed *Paradise Lost*—line by line, skepticism in hand. This was not a theological discussion. No one in this room was concerned with my understanding of God in relation to my eternal salvation and that if the idea of God being fallible were true it would wipe out my faith. So what was I supposed to do? Call one of my former English professors at Andrews University? Complain to the non-denomination campus ministry staff whose weekly Bible studies I attended but wished were richer? I didn't like continually calling up my pastor dad long distance with biblical questions. I really wanted to be able to interface with someone who was in my environment, someone who could clearly recognize my quandary and speak wisely to it. Unfortunately none of my nearby outlets looked like viable options, not even my local church (and that's primarily because I only had a hi-bye relationship with the pastor).

If I had a nearby spiritual guide, I probably would have plopped down on her office couch and said, "So, what am I supposed to do when my classmate thinks God isn't perfect?"—the sort of question that doesn't lend itself to a quick answer. The instruction to pray would have been rejected because it wouldn't have made sense to me. I would have interpreted it as simplistic. But if I knew that the person listening to me was really interested in helping me resolve my frustration, I'd probably remain a bit open to almost anything she suggested. But she'd better make it good because I needed more than the words "God loves you" or a Bible study on Genesis 18—much more. I needed time and community within which to explore the significance of an infallible God and how to live fruitfully among those who beg to differ.

Our students' outlets for spiritual nurture are limited when compared to private Christian/Adventist campuses. It's very likely that they'll hear more spiritually challenging ideas in a public setting. So we must be available to not only listen but also help them establish a firmer foundation. One of my students wants to know how to make religion and spirituality more practical to the general masses. Another wants to know how to take his/her relationship with God to the next level. Yet another wonders what the separation or balance is between religion and spirituality. And as much as these students may attend Friday night vespers, if I don't spend time helping them create an intentionally biblical community, each week's gathering will soon become a non-transformational habit instead of an opportunity for growth, whether or not their questions are explicitly answered.

Why We Should Be Adamant About Serving Seconds

Three reasons:

1. *Technology Often Trumps Tradition*

An extreme example took place on September 6, 2009 when two girls in Australia updated their Facebook status instead of using their phones to call the police when stuck in a stormwater drain. "For these kids, by the sounds of it, being on Facebook is just such a pervasive part of their lives that it seems the first line of response if they need to communicate a message to others," concludes Terry Flew, professor of Media and Communications at the Queensland University of Technology.⁵ "Clearly it's not good enough to say 'well they should have rung emergency services', the point is that they didn't, and we need to think about why that's the case and what strategies can be used in the future," he adds.

In another case on May 15, 2009, Atlanta city councilman Kwanza Hall chose Twitter over 911 through which to get help for a woman having a seizure.⁶ Earlier that month, emergency callers in a particular region of Atlanta had experienced a long hold time and the fire they called about ended up burning a house to the ground. Hall's cell phone battery was low and not wanting to chance long hold times, he tweeted and the woman received medical attention soon after, thanks to the calls made by those who had receive Hall's tweets.

From emergency calls to spiritual questions, we're now prone to find alternate aids. Technology has provided many more avenues for communication that have quickly become normative. And because tradition has often failed to satisfy, we feel comfortable trying alternatives. For better or for worse, our spiritual journeys are not exempt from these changes.

2. *Spiritual sources are numerous and varied*

As a nation, America no longer embraces orthodox Christianity over and above all other belief systems. That is a thing of the past. One of the Barna Group's national surveys on Christianity in America concludes the following:⁷

1. Americans are increasingly comfortable picking and choosing what they deem to be helpful and accurate theological views and have become comfortable discarding the rest of the teachings in the Bible.
2. Growing numbers of people now serve as their own theologian-in-residence. One consequence is that Americans are embracing an unpredictable and contradictory body of beliefs.
3. Today, Americans are more likely to pit a variety of non-Christian options against various Christian-based views. This has resulted in an abundance of unique worldviews based on personal combinations of theology drawn from a smattering of world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam as well as secularism.
4. With people spending less time reading the Bible, and becoming less engaged in activities that deepen their biblical literacy, faith views are more often adopted on the basis of dialogue, self-reflection, and observation than teaching.

Moreover, those who are Christians in America don't all believe in some of what we'd consider to be very fundamental components of the faith: the existence of Satan and the Holy Spirit.⁸ Some find that 40% say Satan is a symbol of evil but not a living being while 58% agree that the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God's presence but isn't a living being.

And yet most self-proclaimed Christians admit that their faith significantly impacts their lives. Barna's research once again reveals the need for our spiritual communities to be intentionally biblical. When our public campus students are part of a Christian society that can't agree on fundamental issues and part of a nation that grounds its faith in a multiplicity of belief systems, we must be willing and able to nurture intentionally biblical spiritual communities.

3. *We're Adventist*

Of all places, the public campus sphere is not the place to shy away from being Adventist. This is not to say that we must teach our students to be outspoken apologists. It *is* to say that as long as we call ourselves Adventist and do campus ministry under the umbrella of Adventism, we must not move away from our biblical foundation as we grow toward a fuller understanding of all God has revealed in the present. As "old school" (or dare I say "conservative") as it may sound, we hope in the second coming of Christ. And wrapped up in that hope are various theological ideas, some of which are unique and some we share with the broader Christian community. We should find ways to embrace the shared ideas and celebrate common ground. However, we must find ways to help our Adventist students embrace the whole Bible, even the ideas unique to Adventism.

That of course begins with us. As leaders, have we embraced our uniqueness and can we talk about it comfortably within a post-modern, post-Christian context, or must we downplay it in an attempt to avoid possible opposition?

Methodology

Here's where I tread more softly—not wishing to propose any absolutely successful actions I'll stick to three guiding principles (recognizing that like the last three foci there are certainly many more). These three act in tandem with the three aforementioned reasons for being adamant about serving seconds.

1. *God's salvation plan is paramount*

Both simple and complex, the theme of salvation is found throughout the work of God in the human race but it takes some effort to effectively contextualize that theme. When we do so, we'll

always implicitly or explicitly point our students to God no matter what our programming looks like. While not every encounter will be overtly spiritual such as a game night or corn roast, the atmosphere can still reflect the spirit of Godly community.

God's salvation plan is community oriented—it seeks the good of the whole not just the individual. Tied in with that plan is our understanding of Sabbath, for example. Based on what we know we'll help our students celebrate those hours. Also connected to the salvation plan is our understanding of our calling as disciples. So we'll help our students recognize the relationship between God's call to teach his Word and the students' various fields of study, talents and skills.

When we keep God's salvation plan in mind, we'll more naturally point students to God as the ultimate source for answers. This will, in turn, help develop our biblical focus and continually point us to the correct sources of spiritual understanding.

2. *Spiritual communities won't always agree*

One of the toughest things to do is engage in a debate in which resolution or understanding is not the goal. It's much easier to share common beliefs. However, many of our students don't agree with us or with the positions taken by the Adventist church, though grounded in the Bible. We have to create what Larry Osborne calls a "need-to-know or need-to-grow situation" in order to facilitate spiritual growth.⁹ If that happens within the context of a program, so be it. But the program shouldn't be the main thrust—spiritual growth should.

When we foster community in which students know their voices will be listened to attentively no matter their opinion, we'll be more effective in sharing the Word of God as a spiritual authority. Some students will still find it difficult to agree with that assertion but when they are part of an encouraging community, they'll probably be more open to hearing alternate ideas.

The community is also necessary because many Christians believe spirituality is so deeply personal that to provide black and white answers is ineffective, removing the mystery of spirituality. And while there is much that remains a mystery, there are some clear answers. Community provides a healthier space in which to grow through many of

those answers especially since a communal testimony speaks volumes to the work of God.¹⁰

3. *Discipleship/mentoring leads to ownership*

Over the last decade, work on discipleship and mentoring has blossomed in the Christian community. No stranger to Adventism, many of our church leaders take advantage of the opportunities provided to learn and grow under the direct influence of a more seasoned pastor or administrator. However, our students, regardless of their field of study, should consistently be afforded the same opportunities. This would be true for personal spiritual growth as well as maturing in a community of faith.

One of the areas of church life in which we continue to struggle is that of effectively transitioning. Once a leader moves on, his or her subordinate is often left unprepared to handle the tasks at hand and in many more instances no one is in place to take over. Were we to effectively disciple and mentor our students, these transitions would be more effective. In addition, our students would be better prepared and willing to continue serving God beyond our ministry contexts. Discipleship is part of the Great Commission—not an option.

Some of Intentionality's Fruit

Creating an intentionally biblical community is a huge challenge. The more holistically we look at it, however, the less intimidating the journey will seem. We're not just holding Bible studies or taking students to church—we're helping them see Jesus at work in every part of their lives—a biblical framework.

In the end, when God's desire to save us becomes our desire, we seek him in spite of tradition's disappointments. But that step comes with time after we've been allowed to question in a safe space, a community that supports our journey. And when our students move through these phases and are intentionally nurtured, they will be better equipped to recognize and positively respond to the work God is calling them to do. Possessing a healthier picture of God, they will continue asking for more but will also be providers of more for those they lead.

Endnotes

- ¹"Food" *AskOxford*, August 27, 2009
<http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/food?view=uk>.
- ²Smalley, Gary. *The Amazing Connection Between Food and Love*. City: Publisher, 2001, 18.
- ³Hines, Benson. *Reaching the Campus Tribes*. City: Publisher, 2009, 20.
- ⁴Research shows that while simple church attendance is relatively new to North America, "there are in the vicinity of six to twelve million Americans presently involved." "How Many People Really Attend a House Church? Barna Study Finds It Depends on the Definition", 2009, The Barna Group, September 1, 2009
<<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/19-organic-church/291-how-many-people-really-attend-a-house-church-barna-study-finds-it-depends-on-the-definition>>.
- ⁵"Trapped Girls Call For Help on Facebook," 2009, ABC News, September 14, 2009
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/09/07/2678945.htm>.
- ⁶"Councilman Uses Twitter To Help Save Woman," WSBTV.com, September 14, 2009
<http://www.wsbtv.com/news/19492556/detail.html>.
- ⁷"Christianity Is No Longer American's Default Faith," 2009, The Barna Group, September 1, 2009
<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/15-christianity-is-no-longer-americans-default-faith>.
- ⁸"Most American Christians Do Not Believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist," 2009, The Barna Group, September 1, 2009,
<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exists>.
- ⁹Osborne, Larry. *Sticky Church*. City: Publisher, 2008, 42.

¹⁰I'm particularly speaking to the way God enlightens a community of believers not just an individual. Miracles are a great example of that as in Acts 3 and 4. Another example is the Adventist Pioneers' understanding of when Sabbath begins. In both instances, God revealed his truth to a community—an act that always leaves less room for doubt

