

IVY LEAGUE ADVENTISM MINISTRY

by Alex España

Abstract

My role as a college administrator at an Ivy League university provides a unique perspective regarding the experience of Adventist students on campus and the role the Adventist Church can assume at such universities. Data, survey results, and strategies are considered for the Adventist Church to establish itself as a relevant, Christ-centered organization to better target one of the largest spiritually questioning population groups in North America.

The Writing on the Wall

“What?” It took me a second to gather my thoughts. For months my diplomas hung inconspicuously behind my students as they sat in my office to discuss their curriculum, ambitions, relationship issues, fears, and a slew of other topics that are so fervently engaged in a manner that only a college student with such raw intelligence and slight immaturity can.

“Yeah, Southwestern Adventist College...where is that?” Her head was completely turned around now, staring at the slightly faded maroon and gold diploma. Before I could answer, the rest of her body adjusted as she leaned in and peered even closer to the second diploma, “Andrews University?” Pause. She turned around and looked me squarely in the eyes, “Are you Seventh-day Adventist?”

If I didn’t vocalize it, I’m sure my expression said it... “Oh boy.” Almost instantaneously, a small bead of sweat popped out of the top of my bald head and began rolling down my forehead as a thousand responses and possible repercussions raced through my mind. It’s true, I’ve heard the question before but for some reason, as I sat in my Ivy League uniform of khaki pants, blue blazer, white shirt and colorful polo tie; I suddenly became a bit unsure of myself. What should I say? How should I say it?

If I say, “Yes,” where could this conversation

lead? Would I somehow be mixing my faith with my job? Uh-oh, this sounds like some breach of separation-of-church-and-state laws. Seriously, I’ve been here for six months and will this be how I lose my job? Maybe I can distract her? Hmm, I wonder if I have any movie tickets left over from last night’s event? I could offer her a Starbucks card. No, no, no...what am I thinking, could I actually offer someone who is inquiring about my faith a movie ticket and a Starbucks card?

“Dean España?” Her words interrupted my stream of inaudible panic.

“Yes?” I responded, desperately hoping we could get back to the topic at hand, her law school application.

“Are you Seventh-day Adventist?”

With the pillars of Columbia University’s Lowe Library behind me and the image of me walking across campus with my office belongings nicely packed under one arm and my freshly minted resume tucked under the other, I answer... “Yes... yes I am.”

The student sat back in her chair, her body now relaxed from the pseudo-yoga class it took to examine my education credentials, and smiled, “Sweet; me too! I always thought I was the only Adventist at Columbia...”

Spiritually Lonely but Not Alone

The story is really not that unique. Each year, scores of Adventist students enroll in non-Adventist campuses, public and private. In 1950, for every 100 Adventist church members, there were 26 students in Seventh-day Adventist schools. By 2000, although the total number of students in Adventist schools had surpassed the one million mark, the ratio had declined to less than 10 students for every 100 members.¹

The reasons students choose to attend non-Adventist colleges range from finances to wanting to get away from mom and dad's iron grip to the attraction of a more academically rigorous curriculum. Others enroll in such colleges because they simply did not know of the Adventist college option. But as thousands of Adventist students integrate into these campuses, wandering into the metaphorical wilderness, it appears the church in general simply cuts its losses and moves on.

Two weeks after my encounter with the student in my office, I met Lisa, another Seventh-day Adventist Columbia undergrad. From the Midwest, Lisa attended church when she was back at home but had not visited an Adventist church in New York City since her less than stellar initial experience at a church in midtown. However, she heard through the grapevine there was an Adventist administrator on campus and, after long pleas from her mother, decided to seek me out. I vividly remember the day Lisa came into our office because as I walked past the front desk that morning, I heard my administrative assistant explaining to a student that our office did not have any "dentists." Silly. Five minutes later, my boss walked into my office and asked unscrupulously, "You don't know of any Adventists that work in this office, do you?"

I once again self-disclosed my religious preference, this time to the entire staff (in case there was any question) and soon after, Lisa was in my office. She explained how through her years at Columbia, she felt "alone...like she was the only Adventist student on the entire campus." These feelings eventually led to Lisa disassociating her Columbia life from the life back at home, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Lisa relayed the story of overhearing a conversation from a couple of students behind her as she left a basketball game

on campus one Friday night (gasp!). In response to a question regarding plans the next day, one of the students said, "I normally would go to church on Saturdays but I haven't done that since I moved to New York." (double gasp!) Lisa, assuming the student was a Seventh-day Adventist, quickly turned around, hoping to connect with the guy that mentioned the church on Saturday stuff. But locating those two voices in the sea of faces proved to be of no avail. Lisa was feeling spiritually lonely, and yet she was not alone.

Blinded With Stats

As part of the consortium of schools that participates in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), each year Columbia University surveys the first year class, measuring parental income and education, ethnicity, educational and career plans, and other demographic data such as values, attitudes, beliefs, and self-concept. It also asks religious preference. The 2006 CIRP results for Columbia University confirmed Lisa's belief that she was not alone. Out of the 1170 first year students that took the survey, .8% self identified as being Seventh-day Adventist. Whether this figure was the direct result of heavy recruitment in the Loma Linda area remains to be seen, but what *is* a statistical fact is the first year class of 2006 at Columbia University had nine students self-identify as Seventh-day Adventist. This figure was startling in two ways; first, in volume—the .8% that self-identified themselves as being Adventist was higher than that of the United Church of Christ (.7%), Mormon (.7%), and Church of Christ (.6%). Secondly, as I continued meeting students who felt spiritually isolated on campus, the numbers say they didn't need to be isolated. I figured that statistically there was a potential of more than 30 Adventist undergraduates enrolled at Columbia.

I found another statistic that interested me. While 33% of Columbia University first-year students self-identified as being either Catholic or Jewish, a staggering 35% self-identified as having no religion at all. Draw your own conclusions on that one.

The Importance of Being Earnest

For many years I have heard the cries from church leadership, "The youth are the future of this

church." Even Jan Paulsen, President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, in an effort to connect with the younger generations of Adventists, initiated a "Let's Talk" video series where he engaged Adventist youth in a Q & A format. I assisted in the production of the "Let's Talk—New York City" and was impressed with President Paulson's willingness, candor and seeming transparency.

However, when it comes to the number of Adventist students that sojourn onto secular campuses—at times feeling abandoned by the greater church—it is time to move from "Let's Talk" to "Let's Do." As late as 2007, the Adventist church did not have a ministry category for collegiate ministries; instead, focusing primarily on AY Societies, Pathfinder Clubs, and so on.² If we believe the young people are the future of the church, it is time we place a greater emphasis on the spiritual well-being of college students and take action. This is a generation that expects results, is spiritually questioning and is willing to work if given the opportunity. I can attest to this fact, because in 2002, Adventist students began meeting on the campus of Columbia University. Today, Columbia boasts the most active Adventist Collegiate Fellowship chapter in the Ivy League, participating in ecumenical events, hosting an annual collegiate summit, and engaging in community service.

Membership Has Its Privileges

In order to be a recognized religious organization on campus, most colleges require a club/organization to have a registered "chaplain," a spiritual caregiver that tends to the students, attends campus meetings, and is available to respond to emergency needs. Official campus chaplains also serve as a referral source to the greater university, work collaboratively with other campus chaplains when appropriate, are invited to panels, discussions, and seminars regarding religious issues and campus events. And, most importantly, registered "chaplains" have access to CIRP results and other critical statistical information regarding students who self-identify as Adventist.

In a pragmatic world, conferences in North America would begin "hiring" chaplains to fulfill this initiative—assigning staff to colleges and universities that have a core group of Adventist

students in place and building from there. But given the *sometimes* bureaucratic nature of the church, it can be difficult to be pragmatic. It's time we cast the net further; young alums, local church lay leaders, and faculty/staff, can all get involved in this vital mission work. Something must be done. Roll a plan into action!

When I served the Office of the Dean of Students at Purdue University, one of my responsibilities was to be the liaison between the university and the University Religious Leaders Association (URL). Purdue University has over 30,000 students and over 20 different religions in the URL. One that was missing, unremarkably, was Seventh-day Adventists. It took a change of leadership at the local church before the value of connecting with the campus was fully appreciated. Before I left, the local Adventist pastor had connected with several of the college students, prayed at a graduation ceremony, and prayed with the football team before a game. Imagine, an Adventist pastor (and consequently the greater church) fully immersed into the fabric of campus life. It can be done.

Conclusion

Although strides are being made in reaching secular campuses, without an appreciation, strategic plan and funding from church leadership, we will continue losing educated, connected, and spiritually searching Adventist college students in the name of apathy.

Endnotes

¹Cooper, Lowell C. "Profile of a Changing Church". *College and University Dialogue*. October 7, 2009
http://dialogue.adventist.org/articles/15_1_cooper_e.htm.

²"145th Annual Statistical Report—2007". General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist. October 7, 2009
<http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR2007.pdf>.

