

ADVENTISTS IN NON-ADVENTIST COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY FROM A PERSONAL JOURNEY

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Abstract

Adventist young people who don't attend Adventist schools often find themselves marginalized in the life of the church. Reasons exist for attending non-Adventist schools. Instead of classifying all tertiary schools outside of the Adventist educational system as public education, a more accurate term would be non-Adventist colleges and universities (NACU). The author shares his personal journey with NACUs and makes suggestions for what churches can and should do to minister to young adults attending school away from home. These include relationship building, networking, introducing expectations quickly, integrating students into church activity, and mentoring. This calls for collegiate focused ministry on the congregational level and a re-framing of Christian education to be broadly based in congregations instead of merely at

Adventist schools.

In December of 2008 I entered the world of Adventist higher education as an administrator at Andrews University. Prior to this, my education and career in college/university administration developed in the "secular" world. I never attended Adventist academy or any of our 14 colleges and universities nationwide. This essay reflects my personal academic journey as an Adventist in public schools and non-Adventist colleges and universities (NACU's), as well as my experiences as a university administrator in support of Adventist students. I hope to illuminate the Adventist student experience in NACU's and challenge the definition and approach to Adventist Education in the United States.

I have heard non-Adventist education referred to as the "public sector" by Adventist educators. It is important to denounce this misnomer which hides the truth about access, equity, and privilege in U. S. American education and the context in which Adventist education is found. What Adventists call "Christian Education" is actually a fraction of the

private educational sector, specifically matriculation in Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) affiliated schools, academies, colleges and universities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are 33,740 private schools at the K-12 level, of which SDA academies are a part. The other 98,793 public schools across the nation represent varying levels of quality in education for young people in this country. Whatever the quality, public schools represent America's access and right to education by law. Federal and state governments continue to be challenged in providing equitable high quality education for all their constituents. Private education generally represents privilege and less access for young students, while the caliber such education has a large range.

This is the reality of American schools at the K-12 level of education. This is also the reality for Adventist schools—a private enterprise. Succinctly put, there are disparities among Adventist schools themselves, between the private sector (which Adventist schools are only a part) and the public

sector, and these issues complicate our discussion of what it means to minister to Adventists youth who do not attend Adventist schools.

There are 4,140 colleges and universities in the United States. At the post-secondary level of education, private institutions (2,441) far outnumber public ones (1,699). Approximately 900 colleges and universities in the U.S. identify as “religiously affiliated” institutions, which comprises a little more than one third of private higher education. Adventist colleges and universities represent less than two percent of those religious institutions. Hence, using “public sector” to describe NACU’s is grossly inaccurate. This is important because we may miss significant opportunities to understand trends and issues experienced by other religiously affiliated schools and the broader private four-year college sector when inappropriately label our institutions. Such a practice also skews our standing in the world of higher education.

My Educational Journey

There are several reasons why many Adventist parents do not send their children to Adventist schools. These reasons include affordability, perception of quality, physical distance, and more. The cost of academy and the desire to keep me close to home with my siblings influenced my parents’ decision not to send me to an Adventist high school. However, I never asked my parents about attending an Adventist academy. For the most part I was happy with the schools I attended and felt appropriately integrated into that educational system. Daily morning worship with my family laid an incredibly strong foundation for knowledge of and relationship with my Creator. Conflicting information at school did not bring about confusion for me because these issues were addressed at home. Still, I performed fairly well throughout my elementary and secondary years.

But my achievements were never recognized at church. My church did recognize success markers of my friends who attended the Adventist academy. Their names were often called from the front of the sanctuary for their participation in school activities, moving up exercises, and going away to or returning from boarding school. Certainly other young people who attended non-Adventist schools (public or private) like I did were sometimes

included in Sabbath service announcements. However, those moments did not seem as special or as sincere. Yet I never fussed about these peculiar and subtle ways my church discounted my non-Adventist education. Instead, I interpreted these slights as confirmation that my academic experience would be one that was molded without the support of my church. I saw Adventist education as exclusionary and elitist. Sometimes, I even considered it a farce because it was presented as the better alternative for character building and its students did not always represent that to me.

Toward the end of my high school years I was even more thoughtful and intentional about my academic and spiritual development. I knew I would go on to college primarily because my older siblings did. However, they did not attend Adventist institutions. During my senior year in high school my church sponsored me to attend College Days at Oakwood University (Oakwood College then). My experience was profound. I found the music, fresh country air, and the ambiance of a campus where one could randomly find students in prayer or reading their Bibles freely quite attractive. Until then, I had never seriously considered Adventist colleges for my education. I began to explore it as a possibility.

Although Adventist higher education offered some programs that met my academic interests, I was concerned about the strength of these programs in terms of national reputation. At church, proponents of SDA colleges and universities talked about religious educational themes at the expense of other important considerations, such as preparation for graduate school and career development. Hence, I did not think of Adventist campuses as *serious* college learning environments. The cost of tuition again moved me in the direction of public rather than private education—Adventist or not. I attended college in the State University of New York (SUNY) system and vowed to maintain my faith in a microcosm of the real world where Adventists were not the majority population.

My older sister attended the University at Albany four years before me so I benefited from the connections my parents already had with a family who attended Capital City Seventh-day Adventist Church in Albany. This helped to keep me connected to church for the first two years of college. However,

it was difficult to adjust to a different church culture that I considered less vibrant than my home church. There seemed to be no other church options in the area, and without a car, my mobility off campus was extremely limited. There was one other Adventist student at the University in Albany. She was a year ahead of me and felt as disconnected as I did. Often we lamented how different this church experience was from our own and developed conversations of discouragement. Soon, we lost touch with one another. I am not sure whether she graduated or transferred out from the university. I remained, but felt very lonely at church without more college-aged students around. I also felt underutilized and my detachment grew. Further, this detachment from my new church was compounded by a loss of intimate connection with my home church. I couldn't find my place.

By my junior year, my lifestyle was much more integrated with campus activities. I worked as a resident assistant and became president of two highly influential organizations on campus. I was busy. Church attendance became periodic. Although I kept the Sabbath at home most of the time, I found myself in a downward spiral that kept me moving further and further away from church attendance. With each absence, I seemed to provide opportunities for others to judge me. When I did attend church, I avoided people and quickly left at the end of service. I did not want to be judged. My own feelings of guilt about my lack of church attendance exacerbated the situation. I likely perceived more judgment than was actually there. Meanwhile, leadership opportunities on campus allowed me to hone important interpersonal and professional skills, and sometimes gave me a platform to share my faith. I missed church but could not reconcile the actual experience of attending with the ideal I desired. I wanted church to be engaging, educational, spirit-filled, active, and relevant. It wasn't.

Finally, when I graduated, I gave up completely on church. I began to search for other meaningful spiritual experiences. I thought of religious practice as an unnecessary culture of habit that did not nurture the more important spiritual and personal core of the self. I rebelled. Yet I continually prayed for grace. This lasted for approximately three years until I moved to Syracuse, New York, where I

cautiously answered the call of God to return to church. While I did not feel particularly connected to the programs of the church, I was especially intrigued by the relationships I observed between a group of college, graduate, and professional school students. They were very caring toward each other, creating a small group within the larger church, sharing potlucks and hanging out together. This stirred a passion within me for Adventist students in NACU environments.

Over the ten years that I spent at Syracuse University, it was my personal ministry to develop impactful relationships with Adventist students in order to help facilitate their spiritual development and maintain their connectedness to church. This important work demands thought and effort. However, the most important element is sincere love and an interest in students. As an educator, these elements were at the heart of my work with any student. Adventist affiliation nurtured these elements more rapidly and profoundly.

Elements of My Campus-Church Ministry

Relationship Building. I believe that relationships are at the core of faith expression and they maintain church growth. I quickly "adopted" Adventist students as extensions of my family and connected them with other church members in our small group. We exchanged contact information promptly and began to develop meaningful rapport. I found out their interests, skills, talents, or activities at their home church. As I developed these personal relationships, I took much more interest in the person than any particular agenda to keep them in church. I found that people come to church for relationships more often than to fulfill an obligation.

Network. Support works best when it is within a network. I shared information about students and their well-being with other friends at church. Together, we nurtured individual students, ministering to their needs along lines of interest, culture, gender, etc. This approach created a stronger sense of family away from home and an accountability based on relationship.

Introduce Expectations. Soon after meeting a student, I always introduce the expectation of seeing the student at church (and on campus). I didn't do this in a paternalistic way (at least initially) but with a familial and friendly tone. It was important for me

to let students know they were not alone. I expected them to call me for any need they may have, such as for transportation to church. I also expected them to do well and to be a part of the family. It was important for me to match the expectations that I had of the students with expectations that demanded something of me. For example, opening my home to college students meant having certain grocery items that were favorites of particular students, even foods I did not eat.

Integrate into Church Activity. I have found this component to be especially important for church to remain a significant part of the any student's college experience. My ministry was most successful when I was Adventist youth leader and director of one of the church choirs. I quickly integrated these talented college students into one or more of these activities. The choir became a significant church retention tool because of its very supportive and collegial culture.

Well Rounded Support. Sometimes students feel disconnected from church because people at church do not take their collegiate lives and needs into consideration. An off-campus meal on Friday nights or Sabbath afternoons is just the beginning. I found it was important to also discuss classes, campus activities, professional development and networking, and more with the student. Learning about the other six days of the students' lives while offering encouragement and understanding connected the "secular" life with the "sacred" life for a holistic relationship that supported their success. We provided social outlets as well, doing many non-church activities together.

Mentorship. Older individuals should always consider the relationships they build with college students as mentoring relationships. However, this key element should also be developed in college students as a responsibility they have to younger youth of the local church. I found the college students to be more invested in the relationships they could develop as role models to younger youth of our church. Adventist young people love to give back. Opportunities to mentor facilitated growth and commitment for many of the college students I worked with.

Today, I remain in contact with many of the Syracuse University Adventist students and alumni with whom I have developed strong bonds of

friendship. More importantly, everyone in the small group is connected with at least one person in the group. While each person may be at a different points in the educational and spiritual journey, most remain deeply committed to church and ministry. Such a blessing is deeply gratifying for me as my passion for this type of ministry is a result of my own NACU experience. With the great majority of Adventist youth attending NACU's across the nation, it is important that we develop strategic care for our students. This higher level of care can only be realized when we understand Christian/Adventist education in a new way. A broader view of Adventist education should be engaged to incorporate learning at church and home.

It will take significant changes in the operation and delivery of educational services for our K-12 and higher educational institutions to meet the demands of all our students, providing more equity and access than the formalized Adventist education we currently operate. I consider Adventist education to be the accumulated lessons that promote an understanding of Christ as our personal savior who is soon to return and prepares us to be salt and light in the world as we anticipate that return. This broader definition might help us to administer an Adventist education for the 21st century. This conception views Adventist education as a network which not only includes Adventist schools and colleges as learning centers, but focuses on the student and reaching them where they are.

Three examples of strategies for administrating an Adventist education that all members of a local church community can access include the following: 1) empower families and guardians to facilitate learning at home before or after students go to their non-Adventist schools; 2) be more intentional about Sabbath School facilitation; and 3) assist parents to engage their students in the curriculum of our auxiliaries such as Pathfinders.

Adventist education must be more intentional at church and collaborating with families in the home setting. A resurgence of relevant literature for the 21st century would be effective for equipping the saints. This concept then moves with the student from K-12 to higher education, requiring churches to be intentional in providing deeper learning opportunities for NACU students at the local church and on campus.

Recommendations

- Conference and local church departments of Education must reconsider Adventist Education as an inclusive enterprise with broader reach than Adventist schools, colleges and universities.
- Sabbath School, Adventist Youth Society, homes where Adventists live, and all church auxiliaries where youth participate should be considered learning centers of Adventist education. Hence, curriculums should be developed to reflect this intention with stronger coordination.
- Collegiate Ministries should be developed at each church to include a Sabbath School or distinct Bible study class, campus outreach, and hospitality services.
- Local church Education departments should facilitate transfer services by sending an introduction letter to the church/es near the campus of NACU students with a brief biography and contact information.
- Churches near campuses must reach out to the Student Affairs or Student Life offices to provide information about the Seventh-day Adventist church to be placed in student directories, bulletins, and planners. (Often NACU students are unable to find basic information about a local church near campus in the campus literature because the church has made no effort to provide such information.)
- Pastors of churches near campuses must make a personal connection with Student Affairs or Student Life professionals at the institution and find out what possibilities exist for on-campus fellowships and ministries for Adventist students.
- Collegiate Ministries should include persons who have had a college experience, love youth, and are close to college age.
- Churches should integrate college students into their activities in meaningful ways. College students do not need busy work, but meaningful assignments with lots of lead time.
- Pastors and churches should consider carefully that Adventist schooling can be promoted without discounting education (public, private, Christ-centered or secular) as an important value of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Collegiate Ministries should develop care packages and other hospitality services that encourage local students and students who are away during major examination periods.
- Collegiate Ministries should develop initiatives for parents of college students that help them to adjust to the evolving and transitioning relationship with their son or daughter.
- Churches should recognize the return of college students during holidays and breaks, develop financial support initiatives for all college students with need, and provide some type of recognition for outstanding academic achievement and graduations.
- Involve college students in mentoring initiatives of the church.
- A perhaps more radical recommendation may be that the Church should develop a category of church membership that would allow college students to become “associate members” of their campus churches with the right to serve in particular capacities or offices as full members of that local college-town congregation while maintaining their regular membership back in their home church.
- Remember that relationship and connectedness are two critical concerns for the church and college students. Let these be the focus points of Collegiate Ministries.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed K-12 schools and pre-college Adventist education as significant influences on education at the tertiary level. Through a recounting of my own journey in non-Adventist schools and at non-Adventist colleges and universities (NACU's), I demonstrated the tenuous

position of many students when they lose a strong sense of connectedness through relationship with the church and its members. At the root of this disconnectedness is the use of exclusionary language and approaches by our church or members, or the lack of strong intention to be inclusive in our conception of the Adventist educational enterprise. I reflected on my ministry with Adventist college students at an NACU to suggest some principles for a successful personal ministry with NACU students, such as: relationship building, networking, introducing expectations quickly, integrating students into church activity, and mentoring. However, the church must develop institutional strategies that will help us to retain NACU students and help facilitate their spiritual growth and commitment. Collegiate Ministries must become a standard department or component of church ministries at every church near a college or with collegiate members. Education departments at every level of our church must reconsider Adventist education as an inclusive value and enterprise of the church. It is no longer enough to say that families must make sacrifices for Adventist schooling if they believe in Christian education, but to direct significant energies to the full development of Adventist learning centers that will minister to this generation.