

# LET'S GO OUTSIDE: TRANSFORMING THE TRANSITIONS

by Kirk King

## Abstract

*The Seventh-day Adventist Church is serious about the spiritual nurture of younger generations. It spends millions of dollars and dedicates countless hours to preserve the faith of children and youth. However, perhaps the most glaring gap in the church's ministry for younger generations is the absence of ministry during significant times of transition. This is particularly true when those transitions take the young people outside the bubble of the Adventist world. Nowhere is this issue more critical than in the lives of Adventist college students who attend secular schools. The Church is also serious about evangelism. Curiously, the church is missing one of the greatest evangelistic opportunities by not capitalizing on the presence of thousands of Adventist students attending public institutions. It is time to redirect Adventist youth ministry from its goal of preservation to focus on proclamation. Nurture is not the exclusive right of students in Adventist schools or even of those involved in Pathfinders or Sabbath School. Adventist youth and young adult ministry must "go outside," disciple Adventist students who are already there, and reach the public college campus for Christ.*

The poem *Footprints in the Sand* by Mary Stevenson, penned in 1936, has been a comfort to many who have placed their trust in Jesus as their personal Savior. This message of God's faithfulness is, however, lost on those who do not believe in the Savior. The second set of footprints is irrelevant to anyone who has not experienced the tangible presence of Jesus. How can they know of his love unless someone transformed by God's love walks the beach of life with them?

Even young people who have been kept safely in the beach house can have a difficult time understanding the meaning of the footprints in the sand. If the Church is, as one student put it, "The only reminder left on earth that Christ was here,"<sup>1</sup> how will a student who has not yet internalized a personal savior view the absence of their church through significant portions of their journey? Where is God when two sets of prints become one? Where is the church during periods of trial and transition?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed some amazing ministries for children, youth and young adults. From Pathfinders and Sabbath School to a comprehensive education system the Church presents an image of truly caring for the next generation. It is, however, during the

times of transition that ministry is often missing, especially when that transition takes a young person outside the protective bubble of institutional church life.

Nowhere is this more true or obvious than in education. Most young people who receive an education from any source outside the Adventist system of education find themselves on their own. Some are even criticized for choosing a "secular" path. Many look back to find only one set of prints in the sand and have no context to understand that God is still with them.

The overlooked reality is that these students offer the church a most incredible opportunity to reach the world. They interact with the thought leaders of tomorrow's world. They walk the campus with thousands of students searching for meaning in life that only Christ can provide. Though it will take a paradigm shift of epic proportions, the church's young people who are being educated outside the Adventist bubble can become effective disciples for the Gospel.

The church will have to go with them onto the public campus, however. These students need church leaders who are willing to help them find

transformation in the grace of Christ. They need spiritual mentors to disciple them so that they can learn to walk with others and introduce them to Jesus. The church will need to go with them to encourage and empower.

Students who have Christ-centered spiritual support during significant times of transition, like college, find that their lives are transformed by his love for them and they are in turn empowered to reach out to others with that love. The Church—and that includes every level of denominational governance, every local congregation and every member who occupies a pew, can make a difference in the life of a student and turn the transitions in life into transformations in life. However, if the Church is to accomplish this vital task, it will be necessary to go outside the safety of the church halls and walk with the students into the world and onto the secular campuses. And why not go outside? Jesus did in the past and Jesus does in the present. Will we join Him?

The writer of Hebrews ends his epistle with some implications for believers in Christ and his sacrifice. He notes that just as the old sacrifices were offered outside the city gates Jesus was crucified “outside the city gates.” He then puts forth the appeal, “So, let’s go outside, where Jesus is, where the action is—not trying to be privileged insiders, but taking our share in the abuse of Jesus. This ‘insider world’ is not our home.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the Bible the mandate is clear: God’s grace is not for a privileged few to hoard, isolated from the world. Jesus’ sacrifice was for all. The role of every one who walks with their Savior is to go outside and spread the good news.<sup>3</sup>

There are an estimated 50,000-60,000 students with an Adventist background on public campuses in North America any given year.<sup>4</sup> These students need to know their church cares. They need encouragement, support and training to reach out to their campus for Christ. There are nearly 19,000,000 college students in North America this year.<sup>5</sup> That is nearly the same as the combined population of the five largest North American cities, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Toronto. What resources would the church invest in any one of those cities if they were without an Adventist presence? What will the church invest in the 60,000 to reach the 19,000,000?

## **Transitions**

Transitions can be referred to as a time “in between.”<sup>6</sup> “It is the process of letting go of the way things used to be and then taking hold of the way they subsequently become.”<sup>7</sup> One of the most significant and difficult transitions is the time between adolescence and adulthood. Many ancient and primitive cultures created “rites of passage” to mark this transition and teach valuable lessons necessary for the mature responsibilities in the tribe. The lessons often focused on learning skills that could be used to promote the well being of the family or protect the community. These rituals honored the end of one stage of life and intentionally reset the direction to the new. Though often marked at the beginning or end with specific celebrations, these transitions were not seen as events but as a process. In many cultures those engaged in the process would spend several months or even years in a wilderness environment in preparation for their future lives. Those in charge provided this time to help individuals set aside their old identities and find new ones.<sup>8</sup>

While the modern western world has few rites that are so intentional, it is still possible to identify events that mark the end of one stage of life and the beginning of a new. Learning to drive a car or opening a first checking or credit card account stand out as events common to the process of becoming independent. Education provides contemporary culture with its most profound transitions—starting school and certainly graduations.

But, like many of the ancient rites of passage, the true transition is not an event but a process. The years in college are probably the closest Western Culture will ever get to the ancient process of helping youth move into the adult world. Training for a profession is only one aspect of the journey. The acquisition of knowledge is one small part of this transition. The development of life skills, a sense of purpose, a work ethic and a personal world-view are also important elements.

Most schools in the Western World today lack the ability to help students make the necessary transition into maturity because they have become “isolated entities” cut off from the home, the church and the community. “Institutions were created to protect the young . . . Protection has come to mean

isolation.”<sup>9</sup> This analysis came from the National Commission on Youth in 1980. The commission called for changes in the public education system that would partner with the broader community to design new environments for youth that would help as they made the transition to mature, productive adults.<sup>10</sup> There is not a good deal of evidence that schools took this report seriously. Perhaps what is needed is for community organizations, like the church, to embed themselves into the fabric of campus culture, set themselves up as partners and assist in the task at hand. Christian-based campus ministries do that on campuses around the world.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been slow in discovering the potential this type of ministry holds. Perhaps this is due primarily to the fear of losing support for the church-based education system. Yet with at least 70% of Seventh-day Adventist college students attending non-church sponsored schools, it would seem that the need and the opportunity to guide students through one of life’s key transitions would overcome all other fears. Walking with students during the “in-between time” of college is one the greatest ways to ensure that they walk with the church after college and ultimately into the Kingdom! We need Adventist-based transition ministries today!

## Transformation

One of the primary tasks in major life transitions is to discover identity. Who am I within my community? What is my role? Where do I fit in the world? How can I survive? What do I have to contribute? Answers to those questions have become increasingly difficult in a culture that glorifies popularity at any cost and rewards consumerism. Not surprisingly, professions that will bring fame or wealth attract many young people. Few, though, are ready to adopt the Biblical lifestyle that “strength is for service not status.”<sup>11</sup> While most people would agree with the biblical lifestyle in principle, few are ready to digest its implications. Making the transition from self-centered consumer to selfless servant requires total transformation of thoughts and attitudes.

The Apostle Paul put this challenge to the Romans and to all followers of Christ when he wrote, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of

your mind.”<sup>12</sup> People often use this text to encourage a host of external behaviors. While obedience to the law of God and the principles of health can arguably be promoted here, the real issue at hand is much larger. This is Paul’s transition in Romans, the point where he moves the argument from the incredible grace of God in Christ to the personal response of anyone who grasps the message of the Messiah. “In view of God’s mercy,”<sup>13</sup> followers of the Savior are to offer themselves fully to him. This is about being changed from the inside out. It is only then that our worship, our obedience, can be used by the Spirit of God to fill the world with the light of his love.

One of the biggest issues created by isolating youth from the world at large is that they often learn an unintended lesson. They learn to conform to the community they are a part of instead of being transformed by the life of the Master. Conformity is taught when correct behavior is given greater emphasis than God’s grace. Conformity happens when students are insulated from the reality of the world. Since the Gospel was planted in the soil of a sinful planet, it thrives in the context of the conflict between good and evil. Christians were never called to ignore sin or quarantine its members from the world. Followers of Christ are called to engage the world and reclaim sinners. When lives permeated with God’s grace are injected into a sinful world, faith will flourish and people will be transformed.

We could then pose the question, “When is it safe to send young disciples into the world?” Certainly those with a mature faith are better suited to reach sinners while avoiding sin’s grip themselves? Therefore, young people should be sheltered and taught until they are ready to go outside. Right? The trouble with that point of view is that some of the most effective witnesses are the newly converted. The excitement and passion of realizing that, “I was blind, but now I see,”<sup>14</sup> is still fresh and “the most persuasive and effective argument for the validity of Jesus’ claims is the testimony of a changed life.”<sup>15</sup> That testimony is best kept fresh and alive by sharing it with others who also long to be made whole.

While the transition from child to adult is a process, the transformation necessary to reach maturity is best accomplished by engaging the world in which we will live, not by retreating from it. This is, of course, not a “sink or swim” proposition.

This process is more like on-the-job training. Effective disciples learn from their Master as they bear witness to others of his love.

The Gospel of Matthew proclaims throughout its pages that the long awaited Kingdom of Heaven had come in the person of Jesus. Matthew also makes it clear that this Kingdom was to continue to live in the people who, transformed by its power, dared to be disciples. The final verses of the book present the challenge and the promise of support. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples"<sup>16</sup> . . . "I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day."<sup>17</sup> Thousands of college students, already touched by the healing hand of their Savior are going each year into the world of the public college campus. Jesus has promised he would be with them. What about their church? Let's go outside where the students are, where Jesus is.

Following are seven concrete and specific recommendations for church leadership to turn the transitional experience of college into a time of transformation for students. The challenge for the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to create an intentional process where discipleship becomes the natural goal of all programming. What if having a spiritual mentor became as natural a part of the process of growing up for Seventh-day Adventists as getting a drivers license? What if discipleship became the predominant model for youth ministry instead of entertainment, indoctrination or neglect? What if spiritual transformation became the primary objective of the transitional years of college?

## **Recommendations**

The first recommendation is to **prepare students to live outside the bubble**. Church leadership must assume that at some point every student will live in an environment that does not shield them from temptation or cater to their spiritual appetites. Ultimately every aspect of the church's ministry for its young should be refocused on this objective. This will include Sabbath School, Pathfinders, the formal education system and every retreat and program organized by the local church, the conference or any other level of leadership. Every person charged with the spiritual development of youth must learn to ask, "How will this ministry contribute to helping these young people become the 'salt and light'<sup>18</sup> Jesus calls his disciples to be?"

The most important aspect of this preparation is the second recommendation and by far the most important, **introduce students to Jesus** as One who longs for their friendship. Since Jesus is indeed the center of all true faith and doctrine, this should be as natural as breathing. However, the history of humanity and of the church through the ages reveals that sinful humanity always finds a way to exalt itself and its institutions. Discipleship begins and ends with Jesus. He is the only true Master. Doctrine is not sovereign. The Church is not the head. Only Jesus can transform the soul. The body is effective only as each member exalts Christ, who is the head.<sup>19</sup> The message of the Church must always be that "The grace of Christ is the only good ground for life."<sup>20</sup>

The third recommendation is for the Church to **invest in the lives of students and ministries** dedicated to the process of transformation. This includes a commitment of the Church's financial resources as well as the time and energy of the members. It will not be sufficient to invest in existing church sponsored institutions and expect that they are enough to accomplish the task. The Church must go where students are and invest in new initiatives.

One of the first investments should be in the development and support of ministries on public college campuses. It is estimated that there are at least 100 active Adventist-based student groups on campuses throughout North America. Each year these ministries spawn new chapters on additional campuses. If these groups of students are going to become communities that share Christ on campus and not merely enclaves for Adventist students to retreat, it will be necessary to provide support and training. It will also require a continual stream of relevant resources.<sup>21</sup> All of this will take financial support and personal effort.

Another important investment is in a system that networks students with ministries and with supportive churches. Some efforts have already been launched with this goal in mind. The Churches of Refuge<sup>22</sup> initiative sponsored by the Center for Youth Evangelism<sup>23</sup> and the Adventist Youth Transition Network being developed by the Center for College Faith<sup>24</sup> are two examples. Cooperation and coordination will be vital to make these efforts effective. Ultimately the goal of these networking

ministries is to ensure that as young people transition, they connect with people and communities who can continue to nurture the process of spiritual development. We can anticipate these points of transition when students move into or out of college or simply move from one location to another.

The fourth recommendation is to **develop a system of spiritual mentors designed to disciple students**. Draw these adult mentors from the ranks of dedicated Pathfinder counselors, Sabbath School leaders and professional teachers. They might be retired members or young professionals seeking a way to make a meaningful contribution. They will most importantly be local church members who are committed to a personal growing relationship with Jesus and who have a passion to dedicate time to the spiritual development of young disciples.

The role of denominational leaders in this will be to encourage, train and support ministries that make discipleship a priority. Big events, training programs and even resources can create interest and assist in the process, but they will not be enough to grow disciples. The process of disciple-making requires a long-term commitment to a personal relationship. Church leadership can change the current model that promotes, graduates and then neglects youth and young adults. It can begin to reset that paradigm to develop new models designed to intentionally maintain meaningful connections with every young person, especially through crucial times of transition like college. Church leadership at all levels can also begin to recruit and train committed adults to serve as spiritual mentors.

The final three recommendations relate to the methods and goals of discipleship. The fifth recommendation is to **engage students in discussion and encourage a personal faith**. College is a time to develop personal world-views, beliefs and practices. It is vital that Christian men and women devoted to disciple-making possess two important qualities. First, they must have a personal, growing relationship with Jesus that is evident in the way they live in the world. Second, they must be willing to be teachers who encourage personal exploration and creativity. Instead of being told what to think and how to act, youth and young adults need to have the freedom to think for themselves,

personally explore the reasons for faith in God and develop conclusions that they own. Dictating every detail of faith usually proves to be counter-productive. Every person must come to understand the Gospel personally and apply it in the context of one's culture.

Encouraging personal discovery is not the same as promoting the idea of living without absolutes. Absolute relativity is just as dangerous as neurotic religion. That is why the sixth recommendation is that any one engaged in disciple-making should **challenge students to model their lives after Jesus**. That still means honoring the personal freedom of choice afforded by the Creator and affirmed by the Savior. But all spiritual leaders are called upon to model and advocate a lifestyle representative of Christ, who called his followers to "love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>25</sup> Eugene Peterson refers to discipleship as "A long obedience in the same direction."<sup>26</sup> That direction is always towards the personal God, who is both Creator and Redeemer. It is important for those with a mature faith to engage young people in relationships of mutual and voluntary accountability as they travel the journey of faith together.

The seventh and final recommendation is to **send students outside to engage their world for Jesus**. Not only is this command of Jesus to all disciples it is also the most effective way to preserve faith and prepare students for the Kingdom.

When faith is challenged, it is strengthened. "The person who waters will be watered."<sup>27</sup> Interacting only with people of like beliefs will not bring about transformation. In fact, it can be dangerous. And the results look a lot like conformity. This is one of the reasons that the Church needs to honor the decision of students who choose to receive degrees from secular institutions. Going outside the denomination for college may even be the best way keep them healthy inside the denomination. At the same time, the Church must be willing to walk with students as they sort out their faith in an environment often hostile to belief in Christ. It also means being ready and willing to support the efforts of students to lead others to Christ by providing discipleship training and culturally relevant evangelistic tools. "So, let's go outside. Where Jesus is. Where the action is."<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Ministry on the public college campus might be the greatest opportunity for evangelism in North America in the twenty-first century. It might also be one of the best methods to affect the retention of young adults. It holds great potential for turning transition into transformation. This could be the best investment the church will ever make in terms of finances or evangelism. It will look different than traditional evangelism. It will need to be viewed as a process and not an event; as a long term investment rather than a short term kick back. The returns will ultimately be realized both in the church coffers and, most importantly, in the hearts of those who come to understand what it means to walk along the beach of life with the Life Giver. Campus ministry is not about setting up monuments on campus so that others can see that Adventists were there; it is about leaving footprints in the campus sand that many students might come to know that Jesus walks with them.

Let's go outside!

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Gillespie, V. Bailey, and Michael J. Donahue, *Valuegenesis: Ten Years Later, A Study of Two Generations*. Riverside, CA: Hancock Center Publications, 2004, 146. The book was quoting Wendy Murray Zoba, *Generation 2K: What Parents and Others Need to Know About the Millennials*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999, 78.
- <sup>2</sup>Hebrews 13:13, *The Message*.
- <sup>3</sup>See Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8 and Revelation 7:9.
- <sup>4</sup>Sahlin, Monte. *Trends, Attitudes, and Opinions: The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America*. Center for Creative Ministry and the North American Division of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1998. This information is extrapolated by taking the results of a 1997 survey found on page 122 of that report, which indicates that two-thirds of Seventh-day Adventist college students attend a college or university not affiliated with the Adventist church, and then doubling the number of students attending Seventh-day Adventist Colleges, which is around 25,000. Other unofficial studies done in local conferences indicate that the percentage may be as high as 80 percent. Therefore the estimate of 50,000 to 60,000.
- <sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2008*. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastFacts/display.asp?id=98>, Chapter 3. The total Fall enrollment given for 2007 is 18,248,000. Canadian information is taken from Statistics Canada. <http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/101/cst01/educ54a-eng.htm>. According to this source Canada had just over 1 million students enrolled for the 2007-2008 school year.
- <sup>6</sup>Peterson, Eugene H. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 2nd Edition. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 20.
- <sup>7</sup>Bridges, William. *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most difficult Moments*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001, 2.
- <sup>8</sup>Bridges. 7-8.
- <sup>9</sup>Brown, Frank B., Director: National Commission on Youth. *The Transition of Youth to Adulthood: A Bridge Too Long*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980, 13,14.
- <sup>10</sup>Brown, 1-6, *Recommendations*.
- <sup>11</sup>Romans 15:1, *The Message*.
- <sup>12</sup>Romans 12:2, *New International Version*.
- <sup>13</sup>Romans 12:1, *New International Version*.
- <sup>14</sup>John 9:25, *New International Version*.
- <sup>15</sup>Cole, Neil. *Cultivating a Life for God*. Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1999, 17.
- <sup>16</sup>Matthew 28: 19, *New International Version*.
- <sup>17</sup>Matthew 28:20, *The Message*.
- <sup>18</sup>Matthew 6:13-16, *New International Version*.
- <sup>19</sup>Ephesians 4:14-16
- <sup>20</sup>Hebrew 13:9, *The Message*.
- <sup>21</sup>*The Word on Campus: A Guide to Public College Ministry* by Kirk King and Ron Pickell along with videos and workbooks were published between 2008 and 2009. These materials were supported by Vervant, The Church Resource Center of the North American Division. CAMPUS, a public campus ministry sponsored by the

Michigan Conference, has also developed materials for student leadership as well as doctrinal and evangelistic training.

<sup>22</sup>[www.churchofrefuge.org](http://www.churchofrefuge.org)

<sup>23</sup>[www.adventistyouth.org](http://www.adventistyouth.org)

<sup>24</sup>[www.centerforcollegefaith.org](http://www.centerforcollegefaith.org)

<sup>25</sup>Matthew 22:37-39, *New International Version*.

<sup>26</sup>Peterson, 17.

<sup>27</sup>Proverbs 11:25

<sup>28</sup>Hebrews 13:13, *The Message*.

