

SUPPORTING AN ARMY OF YOUTH: PROVIDING NEEDED SUPPORT FOR ADVENTIST STUDENTS ON PUBLIC COLLEGE CAMPUSES

by Ron Pickell

Abstract

The Seventh-day Adventist Church stands poised before a great mission field opportunity to reach today's college campuses. We have a clear mission field – the campus closest to the nearest local Adventist church. We have a clear mandate in the stated mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church: "To proclaim to all peoples the everlasting gospel..." We also have potential missionaries on those campuses in the estimated 50,000 Adventist students enrolled there. In addition, we also have an organizational structure in the NAD Youth/Young Adult Department (ACF/NAD), which is ready to move forward to develop resources and provide networking, training, and leadership to accomplish the task. Church administration and leadership have offered meager resources for students on the front lines of a great mission endeavor. Bold and visionary leadership can make the difference. Like the religious leadership in Jesus' day, current church leaders hold the keys of power to support new ministry opportunities or maintain current efforts. We need bolder support of Adventist ministry on today's campuses. There are important steps we can and must take to support the witness of the majority of Adventist students already out there on the front lines.

Introduction

The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as described on the official church Web site is "to proclaim to all peoples the everlasting gospel in the context of the Three Angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as their personal Savior and to unite with His church, and nurturing them in preparation for His soon return."

In the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, compiled by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life – a landmark survey released February 25, 2009, it was discovered that roughly 60 percent of Americans reared in what it defined as the "Adventist family" of churches, a grouping of Protestants dominated by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, continue to remain in that family as adults. This is encouraging in comparison to American Catholics, who comprise 31.4 percent of the adult American population, but 21.9 percent of whom still claim the faith of their youth – an

alarming 7.5 percent attrition rate in the overall population. However, we must point out that we, too, are hemorrhaging badly, since this same survey, which was conducted in 2001, reported a 71 percent retention rate compared to the current 60 percent retention rate – an 11 percent drop in only 7 years.¹

Other estimates suggest that over the past few decades close to four million members have left the Adventist Church, with some 40 percent from North America alone. There are no good figures for Adventist young adult retention, but personal experience tells me when visiting our churches that the eighteen to thirty-five demographic is our greatest loss. Where are our young people and what is the best way to retain them? This question was raised and discussed in last year's 180 Symposium. This paper will argue that the majority of them are climbing over the walls of Adventism and becoming lost in the public educational system.

The Facts

According to a 1997 study done by the Center For Creative Ministry, researcher Monte Sahlin found that 68 percent of Adventist college-age young people were attending non-Adventist schools.² In 2008, the Florida Conference Youth Department conducted its own in-house study and found that closer to 80 percent are attending public schools. This means that an Adventist home and local church are the only contact that many of our young people have with the faith of their youth, and by the looks of the local church landscape the majority is not connecting there, either.

In the Fall of 2005, the North American Division took a significant step to connect and engage Adventist young people attending public universities with the organization of Adventist Christian Fellowship (ACF). ACF is our answer to mainline and parachurch campus ministry groups like the Baptist Student Union, Catholic Newman Fellowships, Interservice Christian Fellowship, and Campus Crusade for Christ. The mission of ACF is to:

- Build Christian fellowship chapters on public campuses that honor God and nurture the spiritual lives of students in North America.
- Engage students in the mission of the Church through relational evangelism and Christ-like student fellowships.
- Empower local ACF chapters, churches, and sponsors through pastoral support, professional training, and access to resources.

There are currently 73 Adventist campus ministry organizations registered on the acflink Web site, with at least another thirty-some organizations not yet registered that we are aware of through the Center for College Faith.³ A number of regions in the NAD are growing in their awareness of Adventist public campus ministry and beginning to organize efforts to connect with college students in the form of conference-wide efforts and regional campus ministry events.

The need is great! In a recent project to identify and strengthen already existing campus ministry efforts in the Pacific Union, Kirk King and Ron Pickell found many campuses with Adventist students in attendance, yet with little or no

coordinated campus ministry efforts for them. More information on this project and other steps currently being taken in the NAD can be found in a recent article in *Spectrum Magazine*.⁴

Students are our best resource in reaching out to other students. Students connect with one another and are the most important link to the campus. Thus, the need for an organized effort to connect with and support them through training, networking, and leadership is critical in student/church retention and in empowering students to live and share their faith on campus.

On many major campuses, we find Adventist students who care about their church and want to stay connected with its mission. They love God and want others to share in the same joy and experience with Him that they are having. By not staying connected with these young people, we are losing them from the Church. We are also losing our best evangelistic link to the campus.

Adventist public campus ministry is a powerful evangelistic opportunity for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is time we start taking a broader approach to evangelism, investing not only in the more traditional short and often expensive two- to three-week campaigns, but also in the longer-term indigenous evangelistic efforts on campuses. A change like this will engage our young people in the mission of the Church and continue to reap a great harvest for years and years to come.

We have come far in our efforts to develop a strong ministry to the public campus; but we have a long way to go. At this point, we still have very little contact with the thousands of Adventist students on public campuses. Through the ACF network, we estimate that we have contact with somewhere around 2,000 students – equivalent to a couple of our smaller Adventist colleges. But what is that among the estimated 50,000 still out there?

There is need for a coordinated effort among graduate students, Adventist faculty, local churches, and local conferences that will provide training and track students as they leave for college, as well as for alumni who are entering their careers. This age group presents a huge gap in our youth ministry program previously cared for through our own Adventist colleges. However, with less than 25 percent of our students attending an Adventist

college the best way for us to maintain contact with them is through the local church, which means that we must do all we can to strengthen our public campus ministry capabilities at that level. Many of these students want to grow in their faith and desire help in sharing their faith on campus. They also want and need local churches that support their choice in attending a non-Adventist college for whatever reason.

What We Already Have

A definite mission field. There are 4,300 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada alone. These have a total enrollment of approximately 19,000,000 students – a number close to the population of the five largest cities in America. Surprisingly, there is often an Adventist church close to one of these institutions, but no Adventist presence or outreach to the campus. In many cases, we have a church literally across the street from a large state school, with no designated ministry presence.

A clear mandate. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel . . .,” which includes the important world of higher education. The specific mandate of the Seventh-day Adventist Church admonishes us to develop a ministry strategy for reaching today’s college student. In fact, we have two General Conference mandates for campus ministry development and outreach.⁵

The Educational Department of our church also provides a mandate for nurturing the faith of all our youth, regardless of location. The General Conference Education Department official Web site states that the Education Department exists “To ensure the quality of the global Seventh-day Adventist educational system and its work also include collaboration with other ministries of the church to help nurture the faith of Adventist students attending colleges and universities outside of the denomination system worldwide.”

A clear and able-bodied mission taskforce. Consider the 50,000 Adventist students on these campuses who are often ready and willing to organize efforts to live out their Adventist faith on campus. Unfortunately, we still hear reluctant church members and leaders make disparaging comments like, “Adventist students on public campuses are running away from the church and don’t want to be

found,” or “Students who attend a non-Adventist college should not have a ministry effort directed at them as it might encourage them to not attend an Adventist college.”

Such comments are disappointing and uninformed, to say the least. After twenty-five years of college ministry and personal experience with hundreds of students who faithfully attend church, serve in student leadership positions, request Sabbath letters to avoid test taking on Sabbath, reach out to their classmates, and invite them to church, I would have to say that it is clearly the minority that is running away from the Church. In fact, these faithful students are the Daniels of our day, standing for their faith in a secular environment and giving witness to the truth of the gospel among their peers.

Besides, even if they were running away, isn’t running after them part of our mission mandate? Students are in great transition during their college years, and many who start out running away from church are often won back with a warm and genuine personal interest in them. Campus ministry efforts prove very successful and students often literally come out of the woodwork with an organized, relevant campus ministry effort.

A proven track record. Other disparaging remarks center around Adventists being ill-equipped for ministry on the public campus. And then there are negative comments about students themselves: “Students are unpredictable,” and “All they want is nurture and to be served,” and “The non-Adventist students we are able to attract don’t easily become members.” It is true that campus ministry is not a three-week crusade and a baptism. It is evangelism over the long haul and it develops through relationships of friendship and discipleship.

Ministries take time to develop—they grow from students networking together. But it is untrue to say that Adventists cannot do public campus ministry. The ACF book, *Word on Campus: A Guide to Public College Ministry*, describes seven current and very successful campus ministry efforts. Four such ministries are: Advent House Seventh-day Adventist Student Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, with close to 30 years of successful ministry; C.A.M.P.U.S., the Michigan Conference ministry effort that offer training on multiple campuses; Maranatha, in Tallahassee, Florida, with

more than 100 students involved in campus outreach and student leadership; and, finally, our program at U.C. Berkeley, which has had a successful local church-based campus ministry among students on the U.C. Berkeley campus for almost 40 years. These ministries all demonstrate great success in connecting with students, engaging them in Bible study and prayer, challenging them to invite their friends, reaching out to the campus, and all of them can boast of baptisms throughout the years. The fact is, we do know how to do Adventist ministry on public campuses. We have many models of success that can be replicated in one way or another on any campus God opens the door for a new, developing ministry.

Resources and training. *Dialogue Magazine*, a journal for students on public college campuses, has been in circulation for almost 20 years and is printed three times a year. Adventist Christian Fellowship is the official umbrella organization for Adventist public campus ministry for the North American Division and receives division support.⁶ The Center for College Faith (CFCF) was officially launched out of the Berkeley SDA Church this year as a center to help develop resources and training for ACF and Adventist public college ministry.⁷ Some of the most recent resources developed through CFCF are *The Word on Campus* and ensuing workbooks: *The Word in Action: Launching Public College Ministry*; *Growing Your Faith on a Public Campus*; and *Sharing Your Faith on a Public Campus*. All of these workbooks have PowerPoint presentations and lecture guides for weekend seminars to help strengthen campus ministry efforts. They can be requested through CFCF. Michigan Conference's campus ministry program, C.A.M.P.U.S., also has training and resources that students and local churches can use.⁸

What Is Needed

Organizational support. What we lack is the organizational support to accomplish our mission. In order for Adventist campus ministry to be successful with greater breadth, it needs the entire weight of the Adventist Church behind it. In theory, it should already have that support, according to the 1995 General Conference Report on Adventist Public Campus Ministries.⁹ It needs General Conference, division, union, local conference, and local church support, with each layer of church organization and

structure providing the necessary attention and support. This mandate, which was voted almost 15 years ago, was tremendous; but it lacked any clear strategy or power to act and, unfortunately, no action has been taken since the vote.

Full-time equivalents at the GC and division levels. Especially at the GC and division levels, an actual Campus Ministries Department needs to be put in place, with a full-time designated and salaried individual to give overall leadership and direction for this very specialized endeavor. Ministry on a public campus is similar but unlike any other youth/young adult ministry in the Adventist Church. The reason why groups like Campus Crusade and Intervarsity have been so successful in campus ministry is their singular focus on the campus. The campus is ministry outside of our denominational structure. This alone makes it unique to the kind of youth ministry we are accustomed to doing. Of course, the nature of the campus culture adds to the specialization of reaching today's college students with the gospel. In order to be effective here, we will need a singular focus and expert leadership.¹⁰

Resources. We need to continue to develop our own resources and training specialized for our Adventist mission on the campus. Resources from other Christian organizations have been very helpful and will always be part of the reservoir we should tap. But our unique mission and message requires additional resources to support the ministry as we move forward. The Center for College Faith and the efforts of C.A.M.P.U.S. in Michigan Conference are great blessings and will need further financial support as we move ahead.

Funding. Finally, we need money—the kind of money it takes to run any successful ministry effort carried out today. We have the troop surge. Students are already there, but they lack funding to carry out the mission. But at this point, most of our campus ministry efforts receive almost no funding from the larger Adventist organization. The ACF/NAD coordinator is a volunteer position with an annual travel and expense budget of \$15,000, which, although appreciated, is a drop in the bucket compared to what is really needed to carry on a ministry of this scope.

One possible place for funding is from our own education system, which already accepts the faith development of students outside our system. For

example the Northern California Conference, as recommended by the union, annually sends the Pacific Union Conference three and three-quarters percent of its previous year's tithe for the support of Adventist colleges within the Pacific Union. This sum amounted to almost \$1,500,000 last year. Given that there are seven conferences in the Pacific Union, the union support of these colleges is even greater than what the Northern California Conference provided. The Pacific Union supports two colleges within its union and with additional subsidies for Oakwood College. The amount the Pacific Union sends to these colleges came close to \$8,000,000 last year.

We have a total of nine unions in the North American Division. What if each of these unions devoted even less than one percent of what they now send to our Adventist colleges to support ministry in their jurisdiction on public campuses? What if each of the divisions devoted a portion of their subsidy to the GC for the support of ministerial efforts for the same purpose? If so, we would have a substantial campus ministry budget at the GC and division levels and could really do something. All we need is less than one percent of what is already being generated for our own schools, which have less than one-third of our students in attendance.

Like our U.S. banks, we have the money. But we lack clear guidelines on how to appropriate it and make the funds available. Unlike the U.S. stimulus package, such a plan is not a handout, since the money invested in our students on public campuses will eventually come back to us many times over -- in retention of our own students, new converts to the faith, and an increased tithe base.

Another possible suggestion to fund local ACF groups is from the campus ministries budgets of our Adventist campuses. Each of our Adventist campuses has either a full-time chaplain for spiritual life and/or a designated program budget. If Adventist colleges shared some of their budget or made a portion of it available to students on public campuses, this could foster a relationship with those students and create a bridge between students on Adventist and non-Adventist campuses. Adventist campus ministries could broaden their mission to Adventist students on nearby public campuses, which would increase their ministry and might even help public college students return to an Adventist campus in the future.

Future Ministry Plans

What would these additional monies help fund in public campus ministries? Here are a few possible suggestions. To begin with, the GC and NAD campus ministry departments and salaries mentioned above. This along with some possible new resources like those being developed by The Center for College Faith—ACF Mission Year, a student missionary program devoted to students willing to spend a year in practical ministry service on a public campus.

ACF Mission Year is being developed as a year-long taskforce position at a public college campus in partnership with local churches and conferences and the NAD Volunteer Student Missions organization. Instead of going overseas for one year of mission service, students would have the option of staying in their own country and spending a year on a public college campus, helping to launch or strengthen an ACF chapter on that campus.

In concert with ACF Mission Year, CFCF is also working on ACF University, a training program to orient and train students entering public college campuses and to prepare other potential taskforce workers. This program will include training to enhance understanding of postmoderns, the campus environment, campus evangelism, Christian apologetics, and foster leadership of small group Bible studies.

Students have also suggested two other ideas to help galvanize the national movement of Adventist students on public campuses. The first is "Praying for the 1970," a prayer movement for the 19,000,000 students on public colleges in the NAD and for the 70 percent of Adventist students on those campuses. The second is "ACF 7K Walk, Run Bike," a grassroots event to help local ACF chapters raise money and generate awareness for their own groups and for ACF/NAD. With additional funding, these and other initiatives could help grow Adventist public ministry and create awareness of Adventist students who are currently living faithfully for Christ on their campuses.

These are just a few ideas of how additional funding could help move Adventist public campus ministry forward in a big way. We have said nothing about the need for conferences on the national and regional levels, further development of the Center for

College Faith, and continued development of campus ministry resources.

In Conclusion

The time comes for all of our young people to put into practice what they have learned about God and to share their experience with others. For those attending public campuses their faith is already on the line. With proper direction and encouragement the opportunities for ministry on public college campuses through the witness of our own students are great. The fields are literally white and ready for harvesting. This time, however, we actually have laborers ready to engage in the work. We have a mandate, a mission field, missionaries, and a strategy that works. What we lack is the power to act and the funding to make it happen. We need the keepers of the keys to open the vault and release funds to carry out the mission.

The \$6,200,000,000 cost of the ongoing San Francisco Bay Bridge renovation kept the state of California on hold at first—until legislators began to consider the additional cost of waiting. Doing so could raise that sum billions more in wage hikes and loss of revenue. The same could be said about public campus ministry. At first, the cost of funding a ministry to students on public campuses may seem unaffordable. But under closer scrutiny, the costs of waiting and not moving forward will be seen only to increase losses among a generation of young adults who have the potential to advance the mission of our church and magnify the witness of God's kingdom.

This is an appeal to the keepers of the keys to find a way to open the treasuries and turn our students loose on a world that needs their trained witness. Could this be the army of youth that Ellen White talked about seeing ready to carry the mission forward? Do we recognize their zeal for the Lord and their evangelistic potential? Are church leaders ready to support and fund this army already on the front lines of ministry instead of simply nurturing and educating the minority of Adventist students in our own schools? Are we ready to send them out as evangelists onto the campuses that they already attend, thus helping them live their faith in a real world context?

The Church needs the link our students can provide to the campus. The campus is crying out for their energetic witness. But our students will not be

successful without proper funding and resources. They need the tools, training, mentoring and spiritual support of their church to carry out this mission. How can we expect them to stand alone? Our students need the support of their church and they need it now!¹¹

Endnotes

- ¹Kellner, Mark. "Study: Adventists Score High in Membership Retention," in Upper Columbia Conference News. 5 March 2008. <http://www.uccsda.org/News/Membership-Retention>.
- ²Sahlin, Monte. *Trends, Attitudes, and Opinions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America*. Lincoln, NE: North American Division and the Center for Creative Ministry, 1998.
- ³Berkeley, California, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Center for College Faith, *Center for College Faith*, n.d., <http://www.centerforcollegefaith.org>.
- ⁴Pickell, Ron. "Two out of Three: Adventists on Non-Adventist Campuses," *Spectrum Magazine*. 37.2 Spring 2009.
- ⁵"Adventist World Leaders Adopt Campus Ministry Guidelines" in *Dialogue Magazine* 8.1, 1996; and "Secular Campus Ministry Endorsed" in *Dialogue Magazine* 3, 1992, 28.
- ⁶North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. *Adventist Christian Fellowship*, n.d., <http://www.acflink.org>.
- ⁷Berkeley, California, Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Center for College Faith*, n.d., <http://www.centerforcollegefaith.org>.
- ⁸*Adventist Students for Christ: Academic Excellence Combined with Spiritual Excellence*, n.d., <http://www.umich.edu/~asforc~aboutus.html>.
- ⁹"Adventist World Leaders Adopt Campus Ministry Guidelines," in *Dialogue Magazine* 8.1, 1996.
- ¹⁰The current coordinator pastors two churches while overseeing a full-time campus ministry program at U.C. Berkeley that has some 50 students involved on a weekly basis. It is unrealistic to think that much can really be done to help grow a division-wide campus ministry effort under the leadership of someone with all these responsibilities.
- ¹¹The author would like to thank Leigh Johnson for helping prepare this paper for publication.