What is a "Community" Church Plant?

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Interview with Hyveth Williams

What is a "Community" Church Plant?

Dr. Hyveth Williams, Professor of Homiletics, currently serves as a faculty member in the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) program in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Prior to that, she served for thirteen-and-a-half years as senior pastor of Campus Hill Church in Loma Linda, California. She is the first Black female pastor and the first female senior pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Prior to her appointment as professor in 2009, she also served as an adjunct professor of religion on the Loma Linda University Faculty of Religion and at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. A graduate of Columbia Union College with a Bachelor of Arts in Theology (1984), Pastor Williams received her Master of Divinity degree from Andrews University (1989). In 1998 she graduated from Boston University School of Theology with a Doctor of Ministry degree. Dr. Williams holds the distinction of being the first non-Episcopalian to receive the prestigious Fellowship from the Episcopal College of Preachers, National Cathedral, in Washington, DC. She is the author of four books and numerous articles in Insight, Signs of the Times, Adventist Review, Ministry, Women of Spirit, Message and Celebration magazines.

Because of her outreach into the community, JACL personnel interviewed her in the spring of 2015. It is our hope that her experiences will spark some dialogue about how churches of all denominations can impact the communities where they worship.

Interviewers (I): Dr. Hyveth, let’s start by setting the stage: What is the foundation of Jesus’ saying, “Go ye into all the world”? What did He mean, and what does that mean for the church in the 21st century?
Dr. Hyveth Williams (HW): First, I think we have a misunderstanding of discipleship, because we tend to spend most of our time and money attempting to disciple those who have already committed themselves to Christ. For me, the commission to go into the world to make disciples means that we disciple people who have not yet committed to Christ. I don’t see anywhere in the Scriptures where Jesus said, “Now Peter, you take John upstairs and disciple him.” This was not the command. The command was to go to people who didn’t know, to make disciples of them. I also think it is good that once they are made disciples, they then have to go out again, and make disciples of those who have not yet been discipled. So for me, that is what the Great Commission is all about. It is a continuous going out. You become a disciple, and then you go out. But you don’t stay in the house discipling each other.

I: Good. So how do you make sense of that as a seminary professor, and where has that led you in your thinking?

HW: I’m a parish pastor at heart. I’m here teaching, and the first thing I did was to turn the seminary into my parish. I began to pastor the seminarians as I would my church, but that wasn’t fulfilling enough—because I was discipling the disciples. So then I had this desire to get involved in a very practical way in my church, but I found that the churches to which I aligned myself the first two or three years of my being in Berrien Springs didn’t fulfill that need for me. They were also discipling the disciples, spending an enormous amount of time and resources on discipling disciples, which, from my perspective, doesn’t work.

So anyway, I’d decided that I had enough of being discipled. Well, I’m already a disciple, so I prayed about it and talked with a couple friends as well as some of my students. We then decided to just walk the streets in Chicago, knock on doors, and find some non-disciples to make them into disciples of Jesus Christ.

And so before launching out on such an unconventional mission, I met with my pastor and told him that I wouldn’t be coming back to church, because I didn’t want him to think that I had dropped out and was just sleeping in on Saturdays, our Sabbaths. When I mentioned it to him, he appreciated my candor and prayed for me. At the end of prayer he said, “I had a mission that I started in South Bend, but I am about to close it. But the location is so good I don’t want to give it up. I wonder if you would just check it out and see if it’s something you could do instead of going to Chicago.” So I went to this location one Sabbath and the moment I walked in, it’s as if I heard the voice of God. You know how in movies you hear “Da da da daaaa!” (EXUBER-
ANT MUSICAL NOTES)—you know, like angels singing, harps playing. Well, that was the kind of reaction I had. I just knew this was what God wanted me to do—to do a mission in South Bend.

So we fasted and prayed for about a month, then we prayed and walked the area around the church building and felt confirmation after confirmation. Then we knocked on doors, went in the malls and in the supermarket parking lots, and we told people we were going to do this ministry. We prayed and hoped that people would come. We received a lot of names of former Adventists. We visited. We sent them letters of apology for our negligence. All of these kinds of things eventually paid off.

On the day when we launched, 90 people showed up. Now at least 30 of those were students, but the rest were community people with whom we had gotten in touch. And that is how we started. We have not stopped. It has just been growing, growing, growing since.

A community plant is one that focuses on the health of the community.

I: But there is something unique about your church. And that’s this whole community outreach. How does that play out in your church?

HW: Well, the thing is that we don’t call it a church plant because many such church plants in our denomination are the result of a church split. It’s people who are feeling disenfranchised or disgruntled with a certain church so they go and they start another church and call it a “plant.”

Anyway, I read this book, Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said? by Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo. I was so impressed with their description of a community plant that I decided that we should do a community church plant. A community plant is one that focuses on the health of the community. This means that you focus on the health of all of the churches in the community, regardless of the denomination, and the health of the people who live in the community, because a healthy community breeds healthy children. And what we are planting, what we want it to be is a healthy church.

So we agreed on certain principles that we would apply to this. One is that Sabbath worship would be truly worship, and not trying to entertain the saints. So we don’t really spend time or money trying to get the best singer or the best music. People who worship bring whatever they have to worship. And we accept it. So if you show up one day, somebody may sing off key, but
that is their act of worship from their heart, and that's fine with us.

We do, however, insist on everything that we do in the worship service is an offering to God, and not to please human beings. Because our worship services in general in the Adventist church are too anthropocentric, we want ours to be more theocentric. So that is the number one thing that we decided.

For example, we don’t collect an offering in the traditional way it is done in our churches, with someone making long appeals to pay for the lights and heat. We have a box that we put in front of the people, and if at any time in the service they are moved by the Spirit to give, as an act of worship, they come forward and place their gift in the box. We have been overwhelmed by the generosity of our worshippers through whom God has provided so that we lack nothing. We can always use more, but we lack nothing. (LAUGHTER)

**I:** God never gives us more than we need to use.

**HW:** Exactly. And all of the resources go into the ministry. I don’t take a penny for myself. I am paid by Andrews University and I live off of my salary from Andrews University. I’ve put all of my savings into this venture, but that is fine, too, because God is my husband and He’s pretty cool. (LAUGHTER)

The second thing that we decided we were going to do was not to allow Adventist members to transfer from their church into The Grace Place (TGP) unless they were committed to working with us in the community. For example, I just had a phone call this week from a woman who said she hasn’t been to church for a while, because she was mad at her pastor or something like that and she would like to come to The Grace Place. I am about to schedule a meeting with her, because I am going to pray with her, and encourage her to go to her church. We won’t accept her because, until she goes to her church and is reconciled with the people there, she is going to bring that negative stuff to us. And we have new people, newborn Christians who have never been Adventist before. Some of them have never been in a church before. We have a lot of returning Adventists who are being healed from the hurts they suffered in other congregations. We don’t want negative energies to pollute the atmosphere. So we are very careful about that.

The other reason is that we really want to measure growth, because transfers from their congregation to ours are not church growth. We want to see how many people come to the Lord through this model. So these are some of the things we do with which traditional Adventists might not be comfortable. Another is serving meat products—clean meat products—at lunch. We don’t have potluck because we have a lot of community members, so we prepare the food—both clean and vegetarian meats—and so far, one of our very first
members, a former Roman Catholic, became a vegetarian. She started eating what was available for her, and finding the fellowship so inclusive, she decided to join and after six months became a vegetarian. Now she is just a really strong component of our ministry. We’ve baptized quite a few people. In the two years, I think we have baptized about 30 brand new believers, although we are not so concerned about numbers.

Now here is the thing—anyone can come to worship. Anyone. But joining to be a member, you have to be either a returning Adventist or a brand new believer or an Adventist who is committed to the mission of building up the community. So here is how I personally exercise this community building. We rent from the Community Congregational Church; when we started, they had about 20 or so older members. I preached for them several Sundays, held a joint Easter program and participated in their Thanksgiving program. Suddenly life has begun to come back into their congregation and they are thinking more about growing. You see, if they become healthy, we will stay healthy. Some people may be troubled by this—they are not Adventists, and they are not becoming Adventists. Well, they are becoming more committed to Jesus Christ.

In the two years, I think we have baptized about 30 brand new believers, although we are not so concerned about numbers.

I: And because of that, they are becoming healthier, because God made us whole people.

HW: He didn’t just anticipate that we would be heads, consenting to doctrinal sorts of things. And the thing is, who knows? Maybe we Adventists might get so healthy that they decide to be part of us.

I: Wow! Well, say some more about building the community. That’s a great example. How else are you in the community, and helping the community to be what they really want to be, which is healthy?

HW: We do seminars. For example, last night we kicked off Financial Peace University. We went out and invited the community to come, and we are teaching people how to handle their resources so they can get out of debt
and not have to live the meager existence they do economically. So that is one way. We have done several health seminars on diabetes, and this coming Sabbath, we are having a health fair. We invited a physician from Lakeland Hospital, one of our seminarians who is a physician, and we are going to have women’s health and men’s health. We put it on Facebook and distribute flyers in the community, and they are registering like you would not believe. So we are going to have a big day on Sabbath, and teach the community how to live a healthier lifestyle.

As we minister in the community, we knock on doors, we give gifts, we bring food, we do all of these different things. We discovered that there is a certain portion of the population who is so economically depressed that they can’t give gifts for their children’s birthdays. We started a program called “Just for Kids.” And once a month we invite all the kids who have a birthday that month to come to our church, where we give them gifts and a big birthday party. Sometimes we have a clown who paints their faces and gives them balloons. They get so excited. You should go on Facebook—this one mother came, and she put her daughter on Facebook and she said, “Thanks for making my baby a princess for a day.” And the word is getting out—more than 100 came last month with 80 parents.

I: So the Facebook page, what is that?

HW: Go to www.tgpthegraceplace.org. When you click on that, it will tell you how to get on the Facebook page.

I: Good.

HW: And you will see a lot of the activities we do in the community. We are very focused. Every other week we do a ministry called SAKE (Simple Acts of Kindness Evangelism) where we go out in the community. For example, we have baptized this lady and her daughter. But she lived in a state of crisis because they hoard things. One Sabbath after church, 12 of us went over and cleaned the house from top to bottom.

When she started coming to church, after she came to a seminar, her live-in mate refused to come. He told her one day last winter, when it was really bad, “I don’t want you to go to this church anymore, because it is changing you.” She said, “I don’t know why he is fussing like this, because he doesn’t do anything. He doesn’t shovel the snow or anything.” When we heard that, a bunch of us packed up the car, and we went to their neighborhood, and we shoveled out his snow. And we shoveled out the neighbor’s snow. And guess what? He
came to church. And we did their wedding. And now he is very open to us. So that is how we do community.

I: Building the community.

HW: Yeah.

I: Those are really good examples. So what is in the future?

HW: Well, we have this dream. I’m not always going to be able to do this. So I’m passing on the legacy of this dream that God has given me to seminarians, so we use The Grace Place as a lab for students who want to learn how to do practical ministry in the 21st century. And also, I’m keeping a record, a journal, of what we have done, with the intent of writing it up later, to propose to the church as a model for ministry.

I: That sounds really good. Okay. You knew that we were going to get to this. What theoretical or biblical foundation do you have for what you are doing? How do you ground it?

HW: Matthew 28—Go into all the world, and teach and preach and baptize. That’s it.

I: That’s it.

HW: The Great Commission.

I: Such a great application. So the ideas for doing this, where are they coming from?

HW: Well, I did this in California when I pastored at the Campus Hill Church. I did Simple Acts of Kindness Evangelism when I pastored in Boston. We had an incredible Helping Hands ministry, we called it, where we went out and worked with the homeless, fed them, looked after them. The mayor and everybody knew us and the work we did. People used to come from other churches on a Sabbath just to go out with us into downtown Boston to minister to the homeless. We would put on our gloves, bring warm water, wash their feet, put on clean socks and shoes. We did just many things.
I: Right. So what I’m hearing from you is that this is actually part of who Hyveth has been for a while.

HW: Always. When I worked for the mayor in Hartford before I was converted, we won all of the campaigns that I ran for him—three of them. We won because I went out into the neighborhoods, and did the things for the people in the neighborhoods. Now I’ve just transferred that to my Christian walk. It’s always been part of me.

I: Yes, that’s just the amazing thing about life at this point. We can look back and see how God brought us around that corner, right? So what would you say to people who haven’t had that experience in their life? How do people get caught? How do you inspire people to do something besides just sit in the pew?

HW: I’ve been invited to speak, several articles have been written, the word of mouth has been spreading, and I’ve been invited to talk about what I am doing. I was invited by Dr. Derek Morris to tape a program for Ministry in Motion, and he has aired that and it has gone worldwide. We get a lot of people wanting to know more because people don’t want to sit in the pews. They want to do something. I have been invited to churches. People have asked me to come and share this. And I’ve gone. And they’ve caught the bug, so to speak. So it’s beginning to roll down like a snowball. More and more people are getting it, and swelling the idea, but also creating, re-creating the idea to fit who they are and their circumstances.

I: Of their communities and what they all need. That’s good. So, is there anything else that you want to say?

HW: No, I think I’ve run out of things to say. (LAUGHTER) I am now wordless.