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Scott R. Ward



Church Schools as Centers of Influence in the Community:

K-12 Education as Evangelism

For the past decade or more, many Seventh-day Adventist churches in North America, Europe and some other parts of the world have struggled to succeed with traditional public evangelistic events. The denomination employed these approaches from its beginnings to the mid-20th century, resulting in many churches being planted and established. Over the past few years, I have thought, written, and taught about this topic in my seminary classes and seminars for pastors and church members. One of the critical factors that has led to this decline is quite evident—the current culture in these places is nothing like the culture when the Adventist Church began. And yet, many Adventist churches continue conducting evangelism efforts as if it were. Furthermore, just as culture has changed dramatically over the past century and a half, it will continue to change until the end of time. Learning to adjust and adapt continuously is necessary if the church wishes to reach surrounding communities.

Adventist Cultural Context

As a culture changes, so do people's thoughts and reactions—as noted in the shift from modernism to postmodernism, and more recently, the change from postmodernism to the thoughts and ideas currently shaping the world. While there is a place for tradition, there must also be room to share long-loved beliefs in ways that people can relate to and understand. Just as Jesus talked about the sower and the seed to the farmers around Him, we, as followers of Jesus, must pay attention to the stories happening around us. And, in doing so, we must help people living these stories to understand how the gospel intersects with daily living and can transform their lives, just as it did in Jesus' day. To be effective in our efforts, we must be relevant.

The Seventh-day Adventist denomination had its origins in America during a time known as the Second Great Awakening.¹ During that time, the country was alive with the gospel. Preachers stood on every street corner, and revivals took place in churches every

night. Many youth and young adults, filled with a love for Jesus, began studying their Bibles in earnest and making tremendous sacrifices to share what they were learning.² Through the leading of the Holy Spirit and visions from God, they discovered in the Bible new and distinctive understandings of some doctrines that shed a brighter light on the character of God. Some of these focused on the sanctuary message, the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, the second coming of Jesus, and the state of the dead along with heightened awareness of the role and blessings of health reform and proper education.

The beliefs and teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination began to develop during subsequent years, and they were written down, organized, published, and shared broadly. However, early church pioneers did not record the context in which these fundamental beliefs developed, and as a result, did not capture the culture of on-fire gospel preaching and passionate love for Christ. And, unfortunately, the culture of spirituality and religious fervor in society did not persist.

The culture of the 21st century in America, Europe, and some other parts of the world is very secular. In other locations, a variety of religions are attracting growing numbers of believers. Often, these societies are either indifferent or antagonistic toward Christianity and the gospel.³ Today, people in these lands are no longer living through a great awakening of Christianity where most people are on fire for Jesus or are biblically literate. The soil in which the sower is trying to plant has changed. Rather than sowing seeds of doctrine in a soil rich with the gospel, they are trying to sow them in the hard and rocky soil of secularism and/or other flourishing religions. Because of this, teaching Seventh-day Adventist beliefs as they were taught during our denomination's founding years has proved challenging. Legalism has developed as one result. When I was a child, it seemed that lists of behaviors of what to do and what not to do were very common, and teaching how to have a relationship with Jesus was somewhat new. When I was a youth and young adult, Morris Venden and others were just

The culture of the 21st century in America, Europe, and some other parts of the world today is very secular. In other locations, a variety of religions are attracting growing numbers of believers. Often, these societies are either indifferent or antagonistic toward Christianity and the gospel.

beginning to preach righteousness by faith rather than by works.⁴ This was quite a shake-up for many Adventists then, although much more commonplace now.

The presentation of and approach to teaching the three angels' messages is one example of an Adventist teaching that needs to be updated. When I ask Adventist preachers to describe the message of the first angel of Revelation 14, they usually say, "Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come" (vs. 7, NIV).⁵ This is partially correct but entirely skips the first part of the message found in Revelation 14:6, which is about proclaiming the everlasting gospel to every tribe, tongue, and people. The context of the first angel's mes-

sage is primarily about spreading the gospel, which includes respect (fear) for God and joy about His coming judgment because of the liberation from sin and the ending of a sinful world that comes with it. When we include that concept, along with the principles of the rest of the New Testament, we can achieve an even fuller understanding of the message.

As I have contemplated this persistent omission of the first part of the message, the only logical explanation I can come up with is that founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church may have skimmed over this part because it was already known and understood in their culture.⁶ But it is not well known in the secular culture in which a significant part of the church exists today, so we must put it back into the message in order to effectively reach those cultures. We must be culturally relevant with our evangelistic endeavors in order to reach people and to truly give them the best opportunity to accept Jesus. Hitting closer to home, survey research shows that we lose too many of our own Adventist children from our churches. It's not just the world at large—we even struggle to share the gospel and to convert our own youth.⁷

Church Schools as Centers for Discipleship and Evangelism

How can we develop a gospel culture where we can

lovingly disciple our church's children as well as people from our communities into a personal relationship with Jesus? This is where our church's schools can play a powerful role. Our schools must be campuses that provide a loving gospel subculture for our children and can be centers of gospel evangelism for our communities, as well. Where we once tried to reach our communities directly from our churches, now our churches can also reach our communities by

about churches and schools collaborating in ministry, my observations and recommendations are summarized below as a four-step process.

The Collaborative Ministry Database

Over the past four years I have worked to develop a four-step process for helping pastors to understand the enormous potential of partnering with Adventist education and the role they can play in collaborating with teachers and educational administrators to make our schools thriving centers of discipleship, outreach, and evangelism to the community.⁹ It is important for educators to understand this concept and the resource introduced here so that educators and pastors can more effectively work together.

Step 1 – Invite the Pastor to School

Both educators and pastors must work together to cultivate and build positive relationships between the church and school. Educators can create a welcoming atmosphere that encourages pastors to show up at the school regularly and to participate in activities.¹⁰ When the pastor reaches out and finds that he or she can develop caring and supportive relationships with the principal, faculty, staff, and students by simply showing up, it quickly becomes evident that the church school is an effective place for discipleship. It may be to share meals and conversations, participate in work bees, teach baptismal classes, or be a spiritual companion and

mentor for faculty, staff, and students.

As pastors learn more about the life of the school, they will naturally see the importance of being supportive at school board and committee meetings, more frequently verbalizing support for the school, and sharing good reports about the school with the congregation.

As the pastor's involvement increases, he or she will be more excited to make sure that church members know and understand the tremendous bene-

working through our schools. Where humanitarian outreach activities used to be hosted at our churches, now they can be hosted at our schools, as well.⁸

There are already some schools using variations of this approach with great success, and many other schools would do well to follow their example by following the four steps outlined in this article. Drawing on my experience working as a church school-based youth pastor for 20 years, and in my current work consulting with thriving schools as a professor teaching



fits of Adventist education and talk about the in-depth studies¹¹ that provide evidence of these benefits. Simply living life together throughout the school week and seizing teachable moments to speak a word for God is the beginning of the discipleship process as outlined by the Shema—to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength . . . [and impress these commandments] on your children” (Deuteronomy 6:5, 7).

Step 2 – Collaborate With the Pastor

Educators and pastors can work together to teach students how to get involved in community outreach. These activities can be humanitarian or more overtly spiritual in nature. They might include local park or highway cleanup, homeless ministry, shut-in visitation with the pastor or an elder, or being a partner in giving Bible studies. Another activity is going door-to-door in the community around the school, spreading God’s love through sharing simple holiday greetings and baked goods, taking prayer requests, volunteering to help needy neighbors with yard clean up or other chores, or engaging in outreach to immigrant groups in the community.¹² These are all excellent ways to let your community know you care.

It’s all about breaking out of the fortress mentality and being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world around us. When pastors, teachers, and other caring adults engage in outreach activities together with students, it builds these kinds of activities into the children’s lifestyles and becomes a vital part of their worldview.

Step 3 – Team Up in Outreach Evangelism

Educators and pastors can team up in outreach evangelism based at the school by inviting the community to experience welcoming events and opportunities that Ellen White refers to as “acts of disinterested kindness.”¹³ These are events without a “hook.” That means there is no catch at the end—we just want to help people where they are in life for the sake of helping them. This can include hosting cook-

Once the community members become engaged and interested in the spiritual gatherings offered at the school, the next step is to invite them to events hosted at the church where they can be embraced by the church community at large.

ing schools and financial peace seminars at the school and at the church. In most cases, a school campus provides a more welcoming environment for secular people from the community to come and get to know us than for them to come to the church—especially for non-Adventist Christians and non-Christian families who may be sending their children to our schools. Other on-campus activities to which you can invite your school neighbors include gym nights, softball games, craft fairs, bake sales, and spaghetti dinners, or even a 5K charity run benefiting a local community non-profit.

Step 4 – Create Worship Experiences to Nurture Relationships


Educators and pastors can collaborate to create spiritual worship experiences that nurture relationships. These events or experiences, co-hosted by the educators and pastors, can take place at the school. Newfound friends within the community can be invited to participate in these events as part of the discipleship process. Hosting a worship experience on-campus is an effective way to take the next step in your relationship with those who are now familiar with the school campus and comfortable being there. As the relationship between the school and community deepens, newcomers will be more interested in learning about what motivates those who attend or lead out in education and worship services.

These worship experiences can happen any night of the week or on weekends. In some instances, a youth- or family-oriented church plant may be worth considering. Always move forward carefully with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Once the community members become engaged and interested in the spiritual gatherings offered at the school, the next step is to invite them to events hosted at the church where they can be embraced by the church community at large. By engaging in these four steps, the school and local church will help to fulfill the global strategic plan of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “I will go!”¹⁴

A companion article to this one in *The Journal of Adventist Education*® will be published in *Ministry* for pastors. But teachers and principals need to have a vi-

sion for collaboration with the local church and make the pastor welcome and empowered to carry out his or her part, especially in the transition during Step 4. It's sacred teamwork in which students are an integral part.

These four steps are detailed at <https://www.andrews.edu/collabmin>, and the activities they entail work together to help the young people at our churches and schools to see and experience how to get involved in open and welcoming forms of friendship and evangelism that will help develop an outreach orientation in their own lives that can last a lifetime and empower them to become fruitful disciples of Jesus themselves.¹⁵

There is nothing more helpful in a person's discipleship journey than getting involved in helping others in their journey, thus more fully implanting and growing young people into the body of Christ "being rooted and established in love . . . filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19). 

This article has been peer-reviewed.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Melissa Petruzzello, "Second Great Awakening," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2021): <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Awakening>.
2. *Adventist Review*, "Spotlight on Adventist Heritage" (March 30, 2011): <https://www.adventistreview.org/2011-1509-35>.
3. See Pew Research Center, "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify With a Religion" (2018): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>; _____, "The Unaffiliated" (2021): <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/unaffiliated-religious-nones/>; Neha Sahgal, "10 Key Findings About Religion in Western Europe" (2018): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/29/10-key-findings-about-religion-in-western-europe/>; Michael Lipka and Conrad Hackett, "Why Muslims Are the World's Fastest-growing Religious Group," Pew Research Center (April 2017): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/>.

4. Perspectives on righteousness by faith have been studied and debated by the Adventist Church since 1888, and revisited on multiple occasions. Morris Venden's obituary published by *Adventist Today* gives an overview of his life and teachings, and the controversies surrounding both: <https://atoday.org/well-known-beloved-adventist-preacher-morris-viden-is-dead/>.

5. All Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *New International Version* of the Bible. *Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

6. This is the author's personal observation.

7. Sammy Reyes, "Generation Youth Change: Why Our Youth Leave," *Spectrum* (September 19, 2018): <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2018/generation-change-why-our-youth-leave>.

8. For a visual illustration of this concept, see the video entitled "Pastors and Educators Working Together: Helping Your Church School Thrive" at the top of the page at <http://collabrativeministry.org>.

9. For the complete four-step database, along with additional topic links, see "How to Get Involved" at <https://www.andrews.edu/collabmin/>.

10. For more ideas, see the following articles: Jiří Moskala, "The Church School: Where Churches and Schools Collaborate in Mission," *The Journal of Adventist Education* (April-June 2018): 4-8: <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201880020405.pdf>; Kathleen Beagles and Gavin Anthony, "Building Bridges: A Teacher and a Pastor Dialogue About Discipleship," *ibid.* (Summer 2012): 4-7: <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201274050404.pdf>; Stuart Tyner, "25 Ways Pastors Can Support Their School," *ibid.* (December 1997/January 1998): 30-33: <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae199760023004.pdf>.

11. John Wesley Taylor V, "Joining and Remaining: A Look at the Data on the Role of Adventist Education," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 79:3 (April-June 2017): 39-46: <https://jae.adventist.org/2017.3.8>.

12. As with all activities involving children and young adults, make sure protections are in place to reduce risk and ensure safety. Children and young adults should be accompanied by parents and/or volunteers who have been pre-screened (background checks). Also, necessary permits for engaging in activities such as selling goods, going door to door, or gathering in a public place should be verified and in place. See Elizabeth Camps, "How to Implement Child Protection & Safety Practices Today," *Adventist Risk Management Solutions Newsletter* (July 9, 2018): <https://adventistrisk.org/en-us/safety-resources/solutions-newsletter/2018/july/how-to-implement-child-protection-safety-practic-for-more-on-safety>.

13. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:83.

14. The collaboration of church and school addresses several objectives in the "I Will Go" strategic plan, i.e., Objectives 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, "To Be Defined as the Holy Spirit Leads"; and KPIs 2.4, 4.3, 5.2, 5.3, 5.6, 5.9, 6.1, 6.3, 6.7, 6.8, 7.1, 7.2, 8.1. See <http://www.IWillGo2020.org>.

15. See "Growing Fruitful Disciples Framework: Inventory Your Christian Growth" at <https://www.growingfruitfuldisciples.com/inventory-for-a-framework-and-inventory-for-use-in-settings-where-discipleship-is-the-goal>. See also the Discipleship theme issue of *The Journal of Adventist Education* 74:5 (Summer 2012): <https://jae.adventist.org/archives?index=issue>.