

IT'S NOT ^(ALL) ACADEMIC

A Conversation with Ron Whitehead about Spiritual Life at Andrews University

Ron Whitehead is in demand. The director of the Center for Youth Evangelism in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary for eight years, Whitehead has orchestrated some of the largest events in the North American Division, including international Pathfinder Camporees hosting over 35,000 youth from over 100 different countries and the annual Easter Passion Play at Andrews, which has brought thousands of people to campus each of the last three years. After the "Faith on Fire" Pathfinder Camporee this past summer, Whitehead entertained "six to ten" job opportunities, ranging from church administration to work in Adventist Health Care. Fortunately for Andrews University, he was recently named the assistant to the president for campus spiritual life. Whitehead sat down with FOCUS to discuss his new responsibilities and his vision for ministry on campus.

FOCUS) You had a number of job opportunities elsewhere, but you stayed at Andrews and you've added this new position to your already full plate.

WHITEHEAD) My heart is with Andrews. I love Andrews. I love the students. I love seeing young people catch a vision for their lives in the context of what God has done for them. And I just feel like Andrews has great potential to influence students and employees for the kingdom. There are a lot of things that are great about our campus' spiritual life right now. It's just that there are some fundamental things that we can do to strengthen the university's reputation and image, as well as the spiritual experience for students and employees here.

FOCUS) I want to get back to the image aspect, but how much of your new job has to do with communicating about and coordinating already-established programs?

WHITEHEAD) There are so many good things happening on campus, but the faculty, staff, and alumni don't always know about them. A lot of people don't realize we have the largest Sabbath School of any sister school in North America. They don't realize that we have hundreds of young people, between 600-900, together on Friday nights at "FUSION," which is a once-a-month worship gathering of all our clubs and organizations. We just haven't always connected the dots. Some students and employees, and especially our visitors from off-site, are not really connected well enough to understand what's happening from weekend to weekend.

FOCUS) Besides communication, what do you see as the biggest challenges to spiritual life on this campus?

WHITEHEAD) The spiritual delivery system of the campus is critically dependent upon student leadership. It must come from the students themselves, young adult to young adult. The more they're empowered, the more they're supported, the more they are resourced with equipment or the physical space they need to do their ministries, the stronger the program is going to be and the stronger spiritual life is going to be.

Mrs. White clearly points out that we need an "army of youth rightly trained." Often we do well in training but we forget the last part of her statement that they be "properly furnished." We need to make it so easy for full-time students to accomplish their ministry calling.

FOCUS) What are the particular challenges facing individual students in their spiritual lives at Andrews?



WHITEHEAD) I believe the entertainment industry has compromised how everyone thinks about boundaries. For example, my generation was told, “don’t go to that building—there’s movies in there.” I understand that the older generation was trying to protect my generation back then. But it was based on fear and fear does not motivate for very long. In the past, spiritual leaders failed to teach that it’s not where you watch movies, it’s what you’re watching.

We need to talk to this generation about setting spiritual boundaries for what they put into their minds and bodies. I’m not here to tell them what their boundaries need to be, because they need to go back to the Word, to their prayer life, and to the Holy Spirit. Yet, if they ask me, I’ve got some opinions about boundaries, but all we need to do is help them get closer to Jesus and they will find their own spiritual boundaries.

FOCUS) Well, you may not mandate specific personal boundaries, but a lot of our students’ parents, as well as the larger constituency, want Andrews to be a place that, at least to some extent, shelters our students from the world and its

influences. On the other hand, many people at the institution want this to be a safe place for students to ask questions and to locate their own boundaries. How do you deal with that dualism, particularly from the institutional side of things?

WHITEHEAD) Sure, from the corporate, institutional perspective (*laughs*). Right, I see the point of your question. We can talk about individual student spirituality, but what are the given fundamentals for a student at an SDA Christian university?

FOCUS) There's still the required worships, there's still the dress code, there are still these kinds of expectations.

WHITEHEAD) Of course there are many general rules set in place. For example, male

students, they should not wear a hat in church. Where did that come from? A lot of it's culture, a lot of it's courtesy based on culture, and a lot of it's just common sense. There are institutional guidelines most everyone respects, but there are some rules that 21st century young-adults are questioning deeper than my generation.

For example, they'll ask the question, "Who made the rule that on Sabbath you can turn on a dishwasher, but you can't turn on a washing machine? They're both machines." A second example, "Who made the rule that you have to buy a meal ticket before Sabbath to eat on Sabbath, but you cannot use a credit card to pay for a meal on Sabbath even though the bill is not due for 30 days." Now my generation never asked that question, most of us just didn't go out to eat or wash our clothes on Sabbath.

FOCUS) So how does the university respond?

WHITEHEAD) A Christian institution has a responsibility to set some basic rules for conduct. Just as public universities have the right to set their rules based on their values. If you want to go to the university of X Y Z, you can live in coed dorms, consume vast quantities of alcohol with little consequence, etc. But we think differently here; we're an Adventist Christian university. I think a Christian university has the responsibility to set Christian expectations for employees and students. When a student seeks an education

here, they should clearly understand we are very different than a public university.

FOCUS) Why does it seem that so many students haven't processed that? Students who say, "my parents made me come here." Or students who get here and think, "oh, isn't this too bad, it isn't really like State U, I have to go to all these required worships." How do you deal with those students?

WHITEHEAD) I recognize that about 40% of students who come to required chapel—I'm guessing here—are happy to be there. And I'd say that 60% of the students—again, I'm just guessing—that come to chapel feel like it's inconvenient; they have to stop work or study, and there's a whole series of reasons why it interferes with their lives because of the time of day or the day of the week. But because chapel is required, Andrews has a responsibility to make sure that 90% of the chapels are top quality, so that most who felt inconvenienced will leave saying, "I'm glad I came to chapel today."

So I think our dorm worships, our chapels, anything that we require should be as high quality as possible.

FOCUS) Shifting gears a little bit here, and this gets back to the image idea you mentioned, among SDA institutions Andrews seems to have a reputation for academics perhaps more than for campus spiritual life. Do you think that's an accurate reputation?

WHITEHEAD) As associate youth director for the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists from 1996-2000, I

was on all NAD campuses and I'm thrilled about what's happening spiritually on our sister campuses. But you're right, a lot of people believe—especially those more removed from our campus, but even among some of our own employees—that there is more spirituality at X Y Z school than on our campus.

But this is a clear misperception. One reason that I stayed here despite several job offers is that I think there's a very rich and growing spiritual life on campus. But we don't tell our stories as well as

other schools tell their stories. And that's all about intentionality. We've got to tell our stories better.

FOCUS) Along those lines then, how would you characterize a healthy relationship between academics and campus spiritual life?



WHITEHEAD) Academics are so important! We want young people leaving this institution really prepared to accomplish whatever their particular degree offers them in life. And I hope they make a lot of money, and give a lot of money back to campus ministries (*laughs*)!

But a piece of paper—a diploma—doesn't give students access to eternity. I think a Christian student on our campus

WHITEHEAD) The number one thing alumni can do for our campus is pray for these students. Prayer has been important since the beginning of time. It is a tool for alumni who don't have a dollar to give for the spiritual growth of this campus. If I had more alumni praying for students, faculty and employees, the money would take care of itself.

The other thing alumni might want to think about are other



needs to understand their spiritual life's calling in the context of their degree when they leave here. And so there's that balance that I think a Christian institution offers a student here at AU that is more difficult to find at a public university.

FOCUS) Tell us a little about putting the Passion Play together.

WHITEHEAD) The student-led evangelism event for the Berrien Springs community involves over 500 volunteers and 8,000 visitors once a year. Few campuses organize such a complex event. This is an example of what AU students and faculty can accomplish by working together to share Jesus with our community.

FOCUS) So you've done a number of these massive events—international Pathfinder camporees, you have another one coming up in 2009, the Passion Play—are there other "biggees" that you have in mind for the future at Andrews?

WHITEHEAD) Oh, there are some things in the back of my mind! But I dare not verbally express them (*laughs*). But at the appropriate time you will hear about some exciting additional changes to upgrade the spiritual life on our campus.

FOCUS) Are there things alumni can do to help and support you in your efforts here on campus?

types of support resources. It might be their influence, a committee they sit on, it might be something "in-kind" they could offer us like the cookies and water given to the passion-play guests in the hospitality tent. We are very passionate about outreach here and we want to involve more students with weekend outreach. We need two school buses that cost \$8,000 each. Right now we have more young people wanting to share Jesus on weekends than we have transportation for.

Another way alumni could help is with our Student Missionary program. If it's dollars to help send students all around the world or even if it's through sending "care packages" to students already in the field, alumni can do so much. I'm not talking a lot of money or a lot of time, but maybe an alumni family could adopt a student missionary and do a little something for them to encourage their ministry calling. Contact Shili Seibel (269-471-3211), our Student Missionary director, for a name or two.

FOCUS) So there are lots of ways to support our students and spiritual life at Andrews.

WHITEHEAD) Yes, yes, yes. This generation doesn't want to just talk about their faith, they want to live their faith. They don't want to just go to church and listen to somebody else talk about their walk with God, they want to have a personal walk and a testimony, too. And if they can't find that, they're going to go somewhere else to find meaning for their lives. And I think the most satisfying reason for life on this earth is to have a relationship with Jesus.