

NURTURING THE ADVENTIST MIND

WHAT ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION CAN DO FOR THE CHURCH

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This weekend, as professors, pastors, scholars, and educational administrators, we have gathered to think seriously about the role of Adventist higher education, and, in particular, to focus upon the question of how our Adventist universities and colleges can contribute to the goal of re-envisioning Adventism.

In the current economic environment, with Adventist elementary schools and academies closing, with conferences struggling to maintain their pastoral force and church leaders increasingly forced to address the systemic reasons behind these challenges, the question may well be asked: Is our denomination's historic commitment to Adventist higher education worth the investment? Could the church use its resources better?

And, most importantly, what would the Seventh-day Adventist Church look like if these universities and colleges did not exist? Would it matter? What does Adventist higher education do for the church? And, possibly even more importantly, how is Adventist higher education currently enhancing the church's mission?

In the following pages, I will identify five ways in which Adventist higher education provides an invaluable, essential and useful resource in supporting the mission of the church.¹

1. AN ADVENTIST WINDOW ON THE WORLD

Neil Postman, in his book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, argues that technology has redefined what we mean by religion, art, family, politics, history, truth, privacy, and intelligence—becoming, in effect, a “technopoly.” Arguing that education must take up the task of developing “loving resistance fighters,” Postman writes:

In consideration of the disintegrative power of technopoly, perhaps the most important contribution schools can make to the education of our youth is to give them a sense of coherence in their studies, a sense of purpose, meaning and interconnectedness in what they learn. Modern secular education is failing . . . because it has no moral, social or intellectual center. . . . It does not even put forward a clear vision of what constitutes an educated person, unless it is a person who possesses “skills.” In other words, a technocrat's ideal—a person with no commitment and no point of view but with plenty of marketable skills.²

As Postman reminds us, one of the great opportunities given to us as individuals who care deeply about Adventist higher education is to provide our students a sense of coherence in their studies, a sense of purpose, meaning and interconnectedness in what they learn. For the church, providing an Adventist

¹ I wish to acknowledge my colleagues in the School of Religion at La Sierra University who have generously dialogued with me in preparation for the writing of this paper. I have also been encouraged by conversations with members of the Association of Adventist Colleges and Universities who heard an earlier version of this paper presented during its 2008 Mission Conference.

² Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 185-186.

education for young members who need an excellent university education ensures that these students will have an opportunity to be mentored by professors who not only understand this need for coherence, but also will focus energy on sharing their discipline from a Christian world-view. In this way, the classroom functions as an Adventist window on the world.

Within our institutions of Adventist higher education, professors focus great attention on the academic development of their students while providing that necessary dialogue with the student's faith experience. And students do well in this caring environment. As Adventist universities and colleges pay attention to the theme of creating coherence between a student's faith journey, their educational pursuits, and participation in a church that encourages them to take an active leadership role, the mission of the Adventist Church is deeply enriched.

2. A CLEAR PATH THROUGH

As students growing up Adventist prepare for their college education, they are met with a vast array of choices. And, if the student has good grades and good test scores, the options are increased dramatically. Over the years I have been involved in many conversations that remind me of the difficulty of finding a way through the myriad of life choices young adults face. As Dante wrote in the *Divine Comedy*:

In the middle of this road we call our life,
I found myself in a dark wood,
with no clear path through.³

In many ways, this struggle to find the path that provides clarity and direction is one in which all of us are constantly involved with. This is certainly true for our students as they are increasingly faced with a world that demands the very best of them. Careful academic preparation is imperative for those who are committed to making a difference through their work and leadership.

For the Adventist Church, it is also clear that we are dependent upon finding properly trained individuals who will guide and support the work of a global community, consistently and ably providing resources in a rapidly changing and challenging environment. We need people who can think with clarity and purpose, whose opinions and commitments are born of a broad understanding of opportunities and challenges. Adventist higher education can help our community navigate these exciting times through our work of properly training the very ones who will one day lead our denomination.

In this vein, Arthur J. De Jong challenges us to faithfully choose the faculty who will serve in our schools: "It is important that enough persons who believe in, exemplify, and articulate ideas, values, worldviews, and belief systems consistent with the college's viewpoint be present on the campus as the students shape their lives. Few tasks are as important as the selection of this total community of persons."⁴

As students come to us in search of meaning and community, it is our privilege, as Adventist educators, to work with determination to ensure that the Adventist culture of our campuses will enable students to experience the value and the quality of our commitment to their overall development as men and women of high morals, great faith, and spirited hopefulness. As they seek for direction, as they work toward their

³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy—Inferno*: Canto I.

⁴ Arthur J. De Jong, *Reclaiming a Mission: New Direction for the Church-Related College* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 133.

life goals, we are privileged to encourage them to think of their vocation—that work that God calls each of us to do—as the “place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁵

3. A FITTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF, THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

For those who question if the investment in Adventist education is worth it, I would point to a challenge made by Sharon Parks in her book *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith and Commitment*. Parks argues, “The central task of young adulthood is to discover and compose a faith that can orient the soul to truth and shape a fitting relationship between self and the world.” However, when looking across the prevailing North American cultural landscape, she asks a rather significant question, “Can a culture, bereft of a worthy faith and vision, serve the mentoring role upon which the young adult depends?”⁶

Parks calls us to remember that “while the culture seems to sway between nostalgia and faith in technology, young adults stand in need of a mentoring ethos that beckons them to dream, to believe, and to serve.”⁷

Preparing members for intellectually competent participation in the mission of the church is imperative if the church is to have a future. The young adults who study on our campuses long to make a difference in the world—and we are privileged to participate as they are properly educated and trained to provide invigorating service and thoughtful witness.

From a purely pragmatic stance, the employment needs of the denomination are immense. Ministry professionals, well-prepared educators, health care workers, scientists, attorneys, business leaders and global agents of transformation are needed. The institutions of the denomination are always hungry for well-prepared leaders who can bring new insights and identify invigorating strategies to support the vast array of Adventist ministry and mission. It is our privilege, as educators working within Adventist higher education, to provide well educated men and women for the workforce needs of our growing church.

Our campuses also serve, for students and faculty, as a dynamic training ground with which to embrace the surrounding community, bringing recognition to what it truly means to be Adventist and to be a member of the larger human family.

Last year La Sierra University was inducted into the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll—an honor we were delighted to share with Union College and 125 other outstanding institutions in the United States. While honor rolls are important, the real work is what truly matters! On our campus, over the past school year, La Sierra University students logged some 45,000 hours of service to benefit others, including 10,000 hours provided through the academic service-learning program. Among those who served were 33 faculty who offered service-learning courses, partnering with 32 local community organizations—and, in the process, making friends for the Adventist Church and transforming lives in our community. For the students who work in these service programs, they learn that their commitment to service provides a future and a hope.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 95.

⁶ Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith and Commitment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 177.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Adventist higher education offers the incredible energy of committed young adults, full of vigor and vision who long to share their hopes for their church. Thousands of students give Bible studies, hold evangelistic meetings, sell literature door to door, go on short-term missions and make year-long service commitments, sit with AIDS victims and hold the hands of elderly Alzheimer patients. And the church is better because of their commitment, their desire and willingness to imagine a church that is more embracing and more open to creative expression. Through their service the members of our learning communities declare to the church, “I will walk alongside you and help you reach your potential.”

4. CONTRIBUTING TO THE ONGOING DEVELOPMENT OF ADVENTIST THINKING

Thinking doesn't have to be a barrier to religious belief, and religious belief doesn't have to be a barrier to thinking. One can pray and think at the same time. Thinking is part of our spirituality and spirituality is the most significant element of our core being.

Adventist higher education continues to demonstrate that one can be *intelligent*, *fully informed*, and *truly* Adventist at the same time. When we speak about *colleges and universities*, we are focused and intrigued, by definition, with the life of the mind. The question, therefore, is not whether the church's universities should be intellectually defined, but whether the church wants to have (and is willing to support) colleges and universities in the first place.

Any complaint that this is all “too intellectual” is analogous to a complaint that a hospital is “too medical.” We must never forget that this willingness to focus upon the nurture of the mind is our calling.

God requires the training of the mental faculties. He designs that His [people] shall possess more intelligence and clearer discernment than the worldling, and He is displeased with those who are too careless or too indolent to become efficient, well-informed workers. The Lord bids us love Him with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and with all the mind. This lays upon us the obligation of developing the intellect to its fullest capacity, that with all the mind we may know and love our Creator.

If placed under the control of His Spirit, the more thoroughly the intellect is cultivated, the more effectively it can be used in the service of God. The uneducated [person] who is consecrated to God and who longs to bless others can be, and is, used by the Lord in His service. But those who, with the same spirit of consecration, have had the benefit of a thorough education, can do a much more extensive work for Christ. They stand on vantage ground.”⁸

Adventist higher education offers a number of valuable resources to the church as it confronts an ever-changing and challenging postmodern world. On each of our campuses we have dedicated theologians and biblical scholars who continue to shape our understanding of God and of Scripture. For the continuing development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, our institutions of higher education believe it is imperative that the church turn to these women and men for their insight and guidance. Too often there has been a suspicious glance rather than an embrace, and it is imperative, for the good of the church, that we find a new manner in which to utilize this remarkable resource.

Further, I believe it is imperative that our institutions proclaim our commitment to be a progressive voice for our church, asking appropriate questions and working diligently to find the best, and most powerful, responses. We assert, just as did our early church mothers and fathers, our commitment to be faithful to

⁸Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 333-34.

God and to one another as we participate in the questions and productive debate⁹ that ensures that our Adventist faith is strong, yet also rigorous and growing and has every opportunity to be affirmed by the students we serve.

There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.¹⁰

Another way in which we faithfully serve the best interests of our church involves the integration of Adventist thinking with a vast array of intellectual disciplines. How does our faith inform our understanding of the natural, social, and health sciences? What about the humanities? And what of the growing interest in the performing and visual arts— theater, music, and the fine arts? And how will our understanding of current ethical issues— environmental, social, and biomedical— be guided in a uniquely Adventist perspective if we do not rely upon our universities and colleges?

One example of how the church needs this integration is in the vexing issue of the relation of Adventist thinking to the natural sciences as pertains to the history of life on planet Earth. On the one hand, for more than a hundred years Adventists have believed that “the book of nature and the written word shed light upon each other. They make us acquainted with God by teaching us something of the laws through which He works.”¹¹ On the other hand, we recognize that “creationists do not have an adequate explanation” for “radiometric dates of many millions of years The most difficult question is probably the apparent sequence of radiometric dates, giving older dates for lower layers in the geologic column and younger dates for upper layers.”¹²

What Adventist colleges and universities can do is to provide a supportive environment and conceptual assistance not only to their students but also to the whole church in addressing this issue effectively by re-examining our understanding of both the “book of nature” and the “written word.” In the process, Adventist colleges and universities can be examples of thinking faithfully.¹³

Of course our schools do not fulfill these functions perfectly—any more than conferences or hospitals perform their functions perfectly. But with mutual encouragement and support, we will all come closer to meeting our ideals.

⁹ “Long-cherished opinions must not be regarded as infallible. . . . However long men may have entertained certain views, if they are not clearly sustained by the written word, they should be discarded. Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed. . . . We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed.” “Search the Scriptures,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 26, 1892, 465; repr. *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 36-37; and, in part, in *Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958-80), 1:37.

¹⁰ “Christ Our Hope,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 20, 1892, 785; repr. *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 35.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 128.

¹² James Gibson (director, Geoscience Research Institute), “Frequently Asked Questions,” www.grisda.org/teachers. Accessed 12 March 2008; last update 5 March 2002.

¹³ One recent example of the way in which other faith communities are engaged in this discussion is found in Karl W. Giberson’s *Saving Darwin* (Harper One, 2007). Giberson is Professor of Physics at Eastern Nazarene University; he interacts with an array of Adventist writing on the subject of creation and evolution in this volume.

5. HELPING THE CHURCH TO COMMUNICATE ADVENTIST FAITH TO THE WORLD

One of the more important contributions the Adventist learning community provides on behalf of the denomination is in establishing Adventist credibility through participation in external academic communities and conducting research that increases the sum of human knowledge. When demonstrating the intellectual soundness of Adventist faith, our professors contribute to current theological, scientific and ethical conversations.

As Arthur J. DeJong reminds us,

The church-related college should pursue excellence for many reasons. Let me cite just one. In our secular, pluralistic society, the Christian faith is just one alternative, and it no longer holds a favored position. Church-related colleges must shape their learning program into the best possible program, and they must develop their students with the utmost vigor so that an educational program which integrates faith and learning will stand out in our society as the best educational process. It must also be the best to insure that the graduates of the church-related college rise to positions of leadership in our society and in our world.”¹⁴

Few challenges are more daunting to the Seventh-day Adventist Church than the task of clearly understanding the world we are today called to serve. As members of the Adventist learning community, we long for our church to work with us in identifying ways in which the amazing resources of intellect and determined energy on our campuses can be utilized to not only better understand the world we long to minister to, but to develop new and effective ways with which to proclaim the message of a soon-coming Savior to a world that is often stranded in a postmodern morass of ineffectual human experience lacking absolutes in the areas of truth and meaning.

Today, this way of understanding the world impacts our literature, our dress, our art, our music, our sense of right and wrong, our self-identity, and our understanding of God. And because we live in a global community—connected by the Internet and by satellite television—we listen to the same songs, wear the same clothing, watch the same movies, and give adoration to the same actors and athletes. This is the world our church must address, and our faculty and students have much to offer to this intriguing, and daunting, work.

A valuable resource that Adventist higher education offers the church is research that enables the denomination to better understand itself.¹⁵ Likewise, the development of much needed church resources are often spearheaded by those who serve as faculty on our campuses.¹⁶ To the church we declare, “We love doing this work!” We know that this is one of the best ways we can continue to give back to our sponsoring church, and we are grateful for the opportunity to help the church communicate its mission to the world.

As Adventist educators, we also recognize that our institutions of higher education nurture Adventist culture and help to shepherd it. Our universities and colleges continue to be the place where communities

¹⁴ Arthur J. De Jong, *Reclaiming a Mission: New Direction for the Church-Related College* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 148.

¹⁵For example, the Valuegenesis and Cognitive Genesis studies, based at La Sierra University, have been the largest studies of any denomination’s youth and K-8 elementary students, while the Adventist Health Study, based at Loma Linda University, continues to provide keen insights for researchers intrigued by the effects of a plant-based diet and healthy lifestyle.

¹⁶ One thinks of the multitude of resources that have been created by the Center for Youth Evangelism and the North American Division Evangelism Institute based at Andrews University.

gather, and campuses are alive with activity and worship and music and art and theater. Our institutional churches likewise benefit this work of keeping our culture alive, as they utilize the resources of the campus to provide excellence in Adventist preaching and music, and serve as an embodiment of our institutional commitment to be a progressive role model and voice for the denomination.

A CALL TO DREAM

I am convinced that the church and the learning institutions we represent must more fully enter into partnership with one another. We must believe the best of one another. While we both at times make mistakes, I am convinced that the church would be well advised to see higher education as friend—not to be feared because of the questions that we at times ask, but embraced because we are willing to ask these very questions.

The church has every right to expect much from the system they so heavily invest in. We must, in turn, expect much from our church—far more than financial support. We hope that the church will always believe the best about the people who have given their lives to the mission of Adventist education, who stand before the young of the church, and who know—deep within their souls—that they are making a difference.

As members of the Adventist learning community, we must help our students, faculty, staff, and yes, even the wider church that supports us, to dream. We must imagine—and work toward a future—in which our community is ever-increasingly characterized by grace, a community committed to serving God and our fellow humans; a place where legalism is replaced with freedom, fear with love, cynicism with hope, performance with acceptance, indifference with passion, conformity with conviction, pride with humility, exclusiveness with inclusiveness, and the letter of the law with its spirit if we are to re-envision and invigorate Adventist faith.

If we do this work well, it may be our greatest gift to our church.