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BY JIMMY PHILLIPS

The common points between us are pretty limited; so let's just get those out of the way first.

We're both college students, sophomores in fact. We go to class too early in the morning, cram late at night, and try to maintain some semblance of a social life.

Oh, and we're both Adventists.

That's where the differences begin.

At the beginning of my classes the teacher willingly sacrifices 10 minutes of the period to share a short devotional thought and prayer.

At her school a teacher can get fired for praying in class.

When I walk into the cafeteria for lunch, I have a hard time deciding where to sit—there's a friend at most every table.

Her conundrum is more along the lines of determining which cafeteria she'll eat at today.

On Friday afternoons I don't have class after 2:30. Administration wants us to have plenty of time to prepare and unwind for Sabbath.

For her the challenges surrounding Sabbath never seem to end. This week, her business law class group decided to hold their project meeting on Saturday afternoon. The choice is simple: deny her convictions, or fail her classmates.

On Sabbath I walk with friends the 200-or-so yards to church. We slip in late and quickly find an open pew in the back of the 2,000-seat sanctuary. If it's a good week, the sermon will catch our interest. If not, oh well; we're just college students, here four years and then on with our lives.

Her church experience is relatively similar. Sometimes the sermon is engaging; other times not. She knows a few faces—one family even invited her home for lunch a few months back. But mostly her feelings about church are lukewarm. It's not bad; people are friendly enough. But she doubts they'll notice when she's gone. And she will be soon enough. After all, she's just a college student.

Maybe we have more in common than I thought.

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A United Approach

From October 19 to 22, 2009, young adult ministry leaders from North America and Europe converged on the campus of Andrews University for the second annual 180 Symposium. According to Japhet DeOliveira, associate director for the Center for Youth Evangelism and organizer of the symposium, the idea behind the gathering is to share ideas and discover solutions for improving young adult ministry.

“When I was a conference youth director, I often pulled ministers together to think, reflect, and talk,” DeOliveira said. “The idea behind the symposium was to create a think tank that would provide perspectives from across many spectrums and suggestions for the church to consider.”

In 2008 the symposium’s topic centered on retaining Adventist young adults currently attending the church and reclaiming those who have already left. As DeOliveira notes, the 2009 topic was born out of those conversations.

“[In 2008] we reflected on the terrible loss rate our church is experiencing,” DeOliveira said. “We began to take a hard look at where most of our young people are. And, well, they’re on campuses—mostly public ones.”

And that’s where the 2009 symposium began. With the tagline “Reach the Campus, Reach the World,” the 2009 symposium was geared toward reaching students on non-Adventist campuses, from elementary school to college.

However, after four days of research presentations, discussion, and problem solving, it ended with DeOliveira suggesting a new, more united approach to campus ministry.

“I began thinking that if we focus too much on public campus ministry, our Adventist schools will feel betrayed,” DeOliveira said. “But by the same token, when we’re just focused on our own schools, it’s easy to forget that our mission is to the entire world.”

His point is well taken. Why should we—as a world church, as a local church, and as individuals—focus on where our kids are going to school? Roughly 70 percent of Adventist college-age students—whether for financial, academic, or personal reasons—attend non-Adventist schools.¹ That percentage is only going up. If tomorrow every Adventist college-age student decided to attend an Adventist college, our schools would be incapable of taking them all.

We have a far greater problem to tackle. By their mid-20s, one out of every two baptized Adventists—regardless of whether they went to an Adventist, Christian, or public college—will leave our church.²

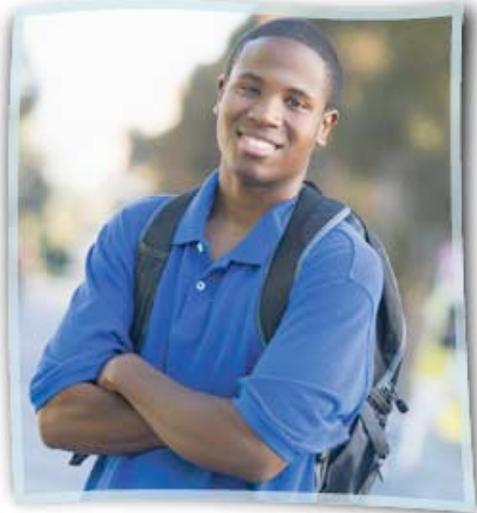
And where do most young adults spend the years just prior to the drop? Colleges and universities.

It’s time to reclaim the campus. All of them.

The question is How?

One of the things I love about the Adventist Church is our worldwide connectivity. Our structure is a strength that few denominations have. At the same time, I believe that the most essential element to keeping young adults engaged in their local church is, in fact, the local church.

DeOliveira concurs. “College kids don’t need contact from my office, or from the General Conference; they need a strong connection with their local church.”



The Public School Crowd

While at her local church Charisse Southwell has often felt strong disapproval for her decision to attend the University of Florida (UF).

For Southwell this disapproval is completely ironic. You see, if not for reconnecting with a childhood friend during her freshman year at UF, she wouldn't be at church in the first place.

"Coming from a not-so-religious household, a Christian education was not an option promoted or even discussed," Southwell said. "I thank God that not all Adventists choose to attend Adventist universities. I cannot imagine how I would've possibly connected with God and the church had it not been for those attending [UF]."

Despite the joy she's found in Jesus, Southwell and many of her Adventist classmates have, at times, felt abandoned by their church.

"The conference gives a few thousand dollars that is split between the six chapters of Campus Advent in Florida, one of which boasts a membership of 115 students," Southwell said. "Such a small amount communicates that our endeavors aren't of value. It's a well-circulated perception that support from our church is not something we receive."

As far as the local church goes, Southwell describes the church she regularly attends as "more accommodating than interested." While she admits that the church has allowed the students to use their facilities, the overall attitude the students perceive from members is that when they are not present they are not missed.

Sadly, Southwell says that these perceptions led at least two students that she knows of to begin searching for alternative spiritual venues this past semester.

"These students have begun attending Baptist Bible studies and programs because of the fire displayed by their young adults," Southwell said. "This fire is in part due to the on-campus support offered by their church. They own a place for congregation, have an on-site pastor, and also receive a sizeable amount of monetary support, which allows them to promote activities to students who desire spiritual guidance."³

Thankfully, there are Adventist churches and individuals who understand the value of proactively entering the public campuses in their community.

Effective Outreach Means Personal Growth

Throstr Thordarson, who served as a pastor in West Lafayette, Indiana, for six years, believes wholeheartedly that local churches can't sit back and wait for students to come to them.

"We estimated that there were 200 to 300 students at Purdue [University] who had an Adventist connection of some kind who weren't coming to church."

So Thordarson went to them. Literally.

"I actually became a student for one class at a time," Thordarson said. "I even created a student organization and got the school to offset the funding by participating in [seminars to prevent] binge drinking and [in] other positive campus programs."

That's when students started coming to church. And once they did, the church actively involved them in leadership, even voting some in as elders. As a point of order, Thordarson notes that the official handbook of the Adventist Church allows students attending a school away from their home church to hold leadership positions without transferring their membership.

In California, Ron Pickell directs Adventist Christian Fellowship—a nationwide organization that focuses on public campus ministry. He also pastors two local churches.

"In my experience students are more spiritually well-rounded when they are integrated into a church setting

rather than just being part of a religious group on campus,” Pickell said. “But too often, students who attend church in their college towns are viewed as visitors.”

To make the students feel at home, the Berkeley church equipped the church fellowship room with game and ping-pong tables, a TV, and other attractions to draw college students.



“They’re here all the time; it’s a connection,” Pickell said. “Building that connection with students while they’re a captive audience is vital. If students are active in a local church while they’re in school, it becomes organically engrained in them.”

At Berkeley, Adventist students have begun to take on the responsibility of leading church outreach in their local community. It’s an initiative that the older members of the congregation have both supported and joined in on.

“Older members need relationships with students, and students need relationships with older members,” Pickell said. “Our students love our older church members

because they feel accepted for who they are. When everyone is working together as a church body, it’s a beautiful thing.”

Cassie Nozil, a freshman at Columbia University in New York City, has experienced the benefits of a welcoming church family.

“Having a church away from home has been a real blessing for me,” said Nozil, a native of Florida.

Church of the Advent Hope is proactive about creating a safe place for college students. In a city such as New York it’s been a haven for students from multiple universities.

“I would have never met the Adventist students from the other schools if not for Church of the Advent Hope,” Nozil said. “College is really hard. But when you can go to church and have people who listen to you and welcome you, it makes being a Christian a whole lot easier; because it’s a lot easier not to be.”

Feeling Like a Number

Like many recent college graduates, Mike Martell still lives in the same community where he completed his undergraduate studies two years ago. It’s a comfortable, familiar place for him and his new bride, Vicki, to begin their lives together.

Another similarity Martell shares with many Adventist young adults is his struggle to find a church that feels like home. However, Martell’s experience is one you might initially brush off.

For the past six years he’s lived in Takoma Park, Maryland, home to Washington Adventist University, within easy reach of dozens of Adventist churches, and less than 10 miles from the General Conference world headquarters.

And he can’t find a church to call home?

Exactly.

“A lot of students that go away to Adventist colleges never find a home church,” Martell said.

“I’ve been out of school for two years and I still don’t feel like I have one.”

Though Martell’s struggle may seem unique, many students who have attended an Adventist college have faced a similar dilemma. These students face the same spiritual disconnection as those on public campuses. But on Adventist campuses the problem is masked.

What problem?

Although most students at Adventist schools attend church on a regular basis, few are truly connected to and involved in that local church.

“Most students feel as though church is just an extension of campus activities,” Martell said. “If the church actually came on our campus and invited us to participate in church functions—as opposed to us just hearing about it from the school—it would make a huge difference.”

Chris Blake, who moderated the first two 180 Symposiums and teaches communication and English at Union College, takes Martell’s thoughts a step further.

“Adventist churches on or near Adventist campuses need to recruit college students,” Blake said.

“The pastor needs to go to the campus ministries department with a list of needs that students could potentially fulfill.”

At Southern Adventist University the Collegedale church has done just that, collaborating with students to plan a weekly church service.

“A few years ago we started a program called Renewal,” said Kari Shultz, director of student life and activities. “John Nixon, the senior pastor at the church, meets with a committee of students each week to brainstorm and plan the services.”

As Shultz says, the goal of the additional service was to make the students feel like they’re more than just numbers.

“It’s very easy to get lost in a congregation of 5,000 people. In order to get our students interested and engaged in the church for life, we need to get intentional about involving them now.”

Blake noted that in Australia—a country with only four boarding academies—kids are heavily involved in church during their formative years.

“Guess what?” Blake noted. “They’re still around.”

Claim Them

In October 2009, General Conference president Jan Paulsen wrote an article for Adventist World entitled “Why Do They Walk Away?” The feature poignantly addressed issues facing teens and young adults and gave practical ways the church can reach them. At the end of the piece Paulsen gives a call to action:

“I don’t have the words to express the depth of my conviction that *we must give young adults meaningful roles within the church*,” Paulsen said. “It can’t be mere ‘busywork,’ but we must vote them into substantive roles that bespeak a high level of trust, include them in decision-making processes, seek their involvement in ways that say: ‘We want to hear your voice.’”⁴

DeOliveira takes Paulsen’s words a step further, noting that as a church, we must reach into the campuses within our reach.

“At the symposium one of the attendees told me that one day he looked at the college campus across the street from his church and said, ‘That’s my campus; I’m going to claim it.’”

And claim them we must. As a 23-year-old, I’ve seen the 50-percent fallout rate firsthand: more than half of my academy class is no longer actively involved in the church, many of whom drifted during college.

I believe wholeheartedly that we can—must—reverse this trend. Because as Pickell matter-of-factly states, “There’s simply nothing that can replace the connection of the local church.”

See now, there’s something we *all* have in common.

1According to the Adventist Center for College Faith.

2Roger Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 2000).

3Quotes and stories adapted from "Personal Journey," by Charisse Southwell.

4Jan Paulsen, "Why Do They Walk Away?" *Adventist World*, October 2009.

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