
CAMPUS LIFE

A New Look at Secular Campus Ministry

Gerald Connell

One of the challenges our church faces is the need to develop an effective secular campus ministry program to meet the spiritual and intellectual needs of some 40 000 Seventh-day Adventists studying at public colleges and universities around the world.

Many Adventist students finish their university experience with their Christian faith strengthened. They go on to specialize in their particular profession and become leaders in their community, their country, and in the church. Many other Adventist students, however, leave the church while pursuing a university degree. This represents a serious loss of leadership potential, a loss of influence in professional circles, and a loss of financial resources for our church.

Unfortunately, some Adventist pastors feel intimidated by secular colleges and universities. They don't think they can have any impact on the campus. Yet we are commissioned to "go into all the world," including the academic world. In order to approach a campus with confidence, we must understand several philosophical and theological issues. First, we will examine the context in which the secular university developed, and then we will propose ways in which Adventist chaplains, pastors, and students can constructively work on the secular campus.

Changing Worldviews

The postindustrial, postmodern information age has brought a fast-paced technological revolution to every facet of our lives, radically changing our views and life-styles. Yet until the development of modern urban society, so-

cial change was very slow. The clothes you wore, where you lived, your socio-economic status, your occupation, and whether or not you had children were all seen as "ordained of God." You lived and died without having to make many choices. Most areas of life seemed comfortably fated.

Religion played a key role in the basic social structure of this type of society. It was the sole source of "knowledge and healing."¹ The clergy, those who had knowledge of the holy, were revered as people who were in touch with "sacred power" that controlled life and destiny.

The development of science and technology undermined the traditional structures and underpinnings of human society. Areas of life once seen as fated could now be explained and controlled through science and technology. In the minds of many the religious worldview was no longer valid. It was replaced with a secular worldview, in which belief in God seemed irrelevant.

Philosophically today's secular university functions on the presupposition that God does not exist. Everything that exists appeared as a result of some natural phenomenon that preceded it. Natural evolution is the "dominant interpretation of the mechanisms of the physical universe."² If God is no longer seen as an essential factor in the physical universe, then humans have no divine mandate or destiny. Life is an "uncharted sea that each person has to map out for his or her self."³ This leads to relativism. In other words, "what is right for you is right."⁴ Morals become mores. Modern philosophy asserts that what was "good and

right for one group of people at one point in time and history is not necessarily right and good for others in another place and time."⁵

Since religion has been dethroned, something else has to fill the vacuum and take control of human life and destiny. This is done to a large extent by the universities, which educate those who will be in positions to make economic, social, and political policy. Knowing this, how can we relate to secular colleges and universities?

First, we must ask ourselves two basic questions: How does God work? By what means does God work in the City of Knowledge?

The answers to these questions and your understanding of the issues involved will determine the attitudes, approaches, and methodologies you will develop in campus ministry.

Two Approaches to Campus Ministry

There are two major approaches to campus ministry. One emphasizes a *theology of presence*; the other emphasizes a *theology of evangelism*.

Most mainline Christian denominations follow the first approach. They believe their ministry is to represent all the church has stood for historically. If a student wants to know something about the God of Christianity, all he or she has to do is come to church or to the chaplain's office.

These mainline denominations usually have churches on or near the campus. Their ministry focuses on religious programs and services. Often these churches deal with social issues. Some provide

worship services for special groups; others host "soup kitchens" where students gather to eat once or twice a week. Occasionally one of the chaplains will get involved in some university committee.

Those who practice a theology of presence see the university, in spite of its ambiguities, as an inhabitation of both angels and demons. These mainline denominations see God already at work on the campus and assume that the students will come to them.

The *theology of evangelism*, on the other hand, is practiced by many of the para-church organizations, including Campus Crusade, His House, The Navigators, and InterVarsity. These groups see the university as a fallen institution, and emphasize the conflict between the philosophical presuppositions of the university curriculum and the teachings of Scripture. They point out that university courses often teach atheism, humanism, and/or Marxism. They graphically and statistically cite the problems of drugs, alcohol, premarital and extramarital sex on campus. They emphasize the moral and spiritual carnage that often results when young people go through these academic systems.

These evangelical, para-church organizations see their campus ministry as a calling to "rescue people from the snake." They actively work on campus, visiting dorms, organizing Bible study groups, showing Christian films, and sponsoring debates, all as part of their campus evangelism.

An Adventist Theology of Campus Ministry

Where do we as Seventh-day Adventists position ourselves? After eight years of experience in secular campus ministry and from devouring the significant literature during this time, I would suggest that to be true to Scripture we must draw from both approaches. Based on the scope of our theol-

ogy, we have a unique ability to bridge the theology of *presence* and the theology of *evangelism*. We should recognize, based on Scripture, that God has both a "left" and a "right" hand.⁶

God's "left hand" has been at work within the university long before we arrive on campus. We know from both the Old and New Testaments that God often works through secular powers to do his bidding. He works through people like Pharaoh, King Artaxerxes, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, and Pilate. In John 19:10 Pilate said to Jesus, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have the power to free you or to crucify you?" To which Jesus replied, in verse 22, "You have no power over me if it were not given you from above."

With this knowledge in mind, the university becomes much less formidable. As we visit secular campuses, our ministry recognizes avenues of cooperation. We are there to work *for* and *with* the university, not just to "rescue people from the snake."

If the university administration sees religious organizations working to meet students' needs, it will often respond positively because the university isn't able to meet all the students' needs. It doesn't have the perspective to help some student deal with personal issues that are "value laden." Students don't always have access to clergy in times of crisis. This can change when campus ministry organizations work with the counseling centers on campus.

On the other hand, the university doesn't want to hear several conflicting religious voices. We would do well to cooperate with other Christian ministry groups. When campus ministry organizations work together as one collective voice, they can have a tremendous impact.

A collective voice of campus ministry professionals can also make an impact on other areas of university life, including curriculum content. After all, many of

these university students are *our* students. A campus ministry delegation made up of mainline and evangelical churches and para-church organizations can collectively represent thousands of students on a large campus. This is one way to influence committees and help shape university policies that affect students directly.

Naturally, if a campus ministry group is to make an impact, it must approach the university both through the proper channels and as a professional organization. We will then have opportunities to help mold the institution that shapes our culture, thus influencing the lives of thousands.

God's Right Hand

God is also interested in the fulfillment of the gospel commission on campus. Philosophy, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the other disciplines have their place, but they will never satisfy the yearnings of the human heart as does the gospel. Our high-tech, modern life has left many students disillusioned, unfulfilled, and alienated. As Seventh-day Adventist pastors and chaplains, we must go to the universities and give Bible studies, nurture our students, and teach them how to share their faith. Evangelism can take many forms, including skits, musical programs, relevant films, guest speakers, and other occasions to which students can bring their friends.

Churches near the campus can survey students to find out what they would like to see happen in church. These surveys will suggest an endless list of evangelistic possibilities. For example, you can teach your students how to build redemptive relationships with non-Adventists and non-churched people. Hold Friday night and/or Sabbath afternoon meetings. Organize group Bible studies. Schedule a party for your students. If the congregation does not provide a "good time," the students will go elsewhere for their social needs.

One of the most important things a church can do to retain students and attract potential converts is to provide worship services that meet the students' needs. If worship services are dead, if the Sabbath School is irrelevant to the issues students face, and if students are not allowed to get involved in leadership, they will "vote with their feet." They will cease to attend.

The Functions of the University

Another important aspect of secular campus ministry is our understanding of the relationship between the church and the university. Some Adventist pastors think the church and the university have little in common. They see the university in opposition to the church. But the church can benefit greatly by looking beyond the obvious philosophical differences and tapping into the resources the university has to offer.

Martin Marty, a Christian critic of culture and professor at the University of Chicago, analyzed the university and came to the conclusion that universities have four basic functions: (1) the transmission of culture, (2) the transmission of knowledge, (3) the training of professors, and (4) scientific discovery.⁷

As we look briefly at these functions, we see that the university and the church have several things in common:

Transmission of Culture. As a church we should have a deep interest in what is being taught to all students at the university, not just our own. The university is not always aware of the ramifications of the culture it produces. It often has high ideals; however, it doesn't always live up to those ideals. For this reason the church has the opportunity and the responsibility to critique the university in a compassionate and scholarly way. In these situations the church can speak with a prophetic voice.

Transmission of Knowledge. As Seventh-day Adventists, we need to accept the fact that we don't have "all knowledge." The church has "essential knowledge"—the biblical message of salvation through Jesus Christ, with its lifestyle and social ramifications. Outside of "essential knowledge" lies an incredible amount of other, useful knowledge. Just as the university needs the church to help it live up to its ideals, so the church needs the knowledge of the university to stay on "the cutting edge." For example, the church uses high-tech equipment and techniques for its media work. It also uses the science of demographics to help spread the gospel message more effectively. By using these tools, which were developed at public universities, the church benefits from the development and transmission of knowledge.

Training of Professors. As a denomination, we are deeply committed to higher education. Many Adventist professors who teach in our own colleges and universities were trained in public universities and have brought their specialties to the church, thus enhancing our own academic programs. Many other Adventist professors teach in state colleges and universities where they work as agents of God. Some are making major contributions in their fields.

Scientific Discovery. People in the City of Faith should never feel threatened by science. If ap-

proached from the correct perspective, the study of science strengthens our faith as we see the complexity and design God has built into the physical universe. The church's mission also benefits greatly from scientific discovery and technological application in areas such as the health sciences.

Conclusion

In developing a theology and philosophy of campus ministry, we realize God has been at work on campus before we get there. Our students need us there for support, nurture, and balance as they chart their course through the academic wilderness. We also recognize our role in being salt and light in the academic community, as well as "rescuing people from the snake." By influencing the university we can influence culture. In turn, we need the university and benefit from it. Adventist campus ministry is coming out of its embryonic stages in our development. We contemplate its future with optimism because its potential, under God's blessing, is unlimited.

NOTES

1. Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), p. 80.
2. Anthony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), p. 43.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
6. Phil Schroeder, "Ministry on Academic Turf: A Lutheran View," in *An Invitation to Dialogue: The Theology of College Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry* (New York: National Council of Churches, Education and Society, 1986), p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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