

Ministry to the “Secular” Campus

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Christians have an obligation to teach the gospel to all nations. However, as knowledge in science and technology progresses, an ever-increasing amount of information is compiled, printed, and preserved. Thus it becomes necessary to develop specialists in almost every field of endeavor, and the ministry as a vocation is not unaffected. As society itself changes and becomes more complex, the task of communicating the gospel without violating social taboos or unnecessarily provoking resentment, and without becoming so involved in political issues that the gospel is deflected, has become more difficult.

With more and more Adventists attending public universities, there is developing a major need for a specialized ministry on the “secular” campus. This is nothing new for some churches, but it is new for Adventists. Adventist colleges are becoming too costly for some students; and, in addition, some students who have a bachelor’s degree from an Adventist college want to continue their education in an area of study for which the two Adventist universities are not equipped.

Many voices deplore this situation, because the students who venture into the secular universities come under pressures and influences that sometimes lessen their allegiance to the church. But it is not always the students themselves who are to blame for this development; sometimes it is the fault of the church. There may be no active congregation in the vicinity to help these students as they attend the university. Or if there is one the pastor may feel threatened by “the intellectuals,” or may present a message and approach to religion that is quite removed from the needs of the students — even if the student population is equal to, or larger than, the number of resident members of the congregation.

Several solutions have been offered for consideration by the church. These solutions include (a) supplying church pastors who are young, well-educated, and student-oriented, and thus able to cope with the special problems of students; (b) establishing student centers with adequate facilities and full-time campus pastors; (c) starting additional chapters of the Association of Adventist Forums to enable students to "keep in touch" through local and regional meetings; and (d) encouraging students to continue their religious education by taking correspondence courses from the Home Study Institute or extension courses from an Adventist college or university.

I would like to propose some ideas that I believe will be helpful in formulating a philosophy of ministry to students on the secular campus. These suggestions are based on my experience and observations as pastor of the University District churches (in Pullman, Washington, and Moscow, Idaho) in the Upper Columbia Conference. The conference has sponsored (with a contribution of funds) my participation in the Ecumenical Campus Ministry at the University of Idaho, and has also approved my participation in the Common Ministry at Washington State University. In this connection I have been encouraged to investigate and experiment with ways of improving the church's ministry to the university community.

TRAINING AND OUTLOOK OF THE CAMPUS MINISTER

If the campus minister is to be effective beyond a very limited sphere, he must be informed and prepared in several different areas.

1. He should be prepared in education. Should he be invited to teach a class, he must know how to fit into the school of religion (if the university has one) and utilize his talents in this way.

2. He needs to be acquainted with the drug scene in order to cope intelligently with problems that arise in that area.

3. He needs to be informed about current and socioeconomic issues — the draft and military machinery, racism, ecology, etc. — in order to understand why students react the way they do.

4. He must be acquainted with such subjects as violence, mob psychology, and group therapy.

5. He needs to become acquainted with other campus ministers and with the vast amount of literature that is now available on campus ministry, so that he will have a broad background of information from which to draw as he formulates his own ministry on the campus.

6. If he has a regular preaching schedule, he needs to be a master of the pulpit. Too many times students and professors sit under great teachers and

associate with some of the world's finest thinkers, but then have to listen to a poorly trained speaker in church.

7. He has to be open to various viewpoints and ideologies as they are presented in the university. He may not agree with them, but he must have the maturity to keep his mouth shut. If he has an opportunity to correct or improve the situation in a nonalienating way, then he should be prepared to make use of it.

8. He should have earned a graduate degree himself, so that he can understand and communicate with the graduate students on their own level. (Most Adventist students on secular campuses are graduate students.)

9. Since the academic community may be both critical and skeptical of "preachers" and evangelistic "zeal without knowledge," the campus minister needs to learn other ways of presenting the gospel. Rather than proclaim the message verbally, in many cases he must demonstrate in a practical way what Christianity can do in people's lives.

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DOING THE ADVENTIST THING

Some people have suggested that in the large university community there is a tremendous opportunity for public evangelism. We tried — twice — using a conference evangelistic team. Somewhere else this might work, but it did not work here. The Adventist students were "turned off" by the methods that were used; few other students or professors came, and none were converted to Adventism. Furthermore, coming on strong with a fight against evolution jeopardized every biology student who was a creationist. The overall impression of the church was not the best. Here at least, the most successful religious approach to the campus scene is quiet, consistent, personal witness.

Others have suggested that we purchase a building for use as an Adventist student center. For such a project at Washington State University, where there are usually fifteen to fifty Adventist students, we approached the North Pacific Union Conference for financial help, since the small, struggling church in Pullman could not afford such a venture. We were advised to sell our church building to pay for a student center; but we decided that we would rather have the church, since such a move would neglect the needs of the nonstudent members of the congregation. Besides, the experience of other churches has shown that student centers are expensive to maintain. If the Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and others have trouble financing and staffing such a center, how can Adventists do it successfully?

Instead of tying up thousands of dollars in a student center, it may be preferable to provide a better church building. Frequently the local church near a university is not the most beautiful in appearance. But the students and the few others in the congregation are not able to build a new edifice; nor, in some cases, can all the redecorating in the world make some buildings look good. The church at large pours millions of dollars into "accepted" methods of evangelism and speaks a great deal about public relations; yet to provide for an appropriate church building and program would be most effective public relations in a strategic location.

At both Washington State and the University of Idaho I have tried to make the church pertinent to the needs of the university students by (a) delivering the best sermons I can; (b) organizing a recognized Adventist club on the campus; (c) having interesting parties; (d) manifesting interest in students' schoolwork by attending their classes, visiting their labs, and praying with them before major examinations; (e) organizing discussion groups that will help them to clarify their thinking about the new concepts they encounter; and (f) giving them offices in the church and letting them make it their own dynamic organization by doing their own programming. Thus I have tried to help them make their university experience a good one, as well as to demonstrate that the church can be relevant to their lives.

But if this is all I do, something is lacking. For I have not touched anyone else; I have missed the total university community. I have not gained a large enough hearing for the one gospel — the good news about Jesus Christ.

AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF CAMPUS MINISTRY

In a cooperative, interdenominational campus ministry, all of the churches involved are just as anxious to preserve their own identity as we are, and they sponsor different kinds of activities; but they work together to meet the religious needs of the total university community. A Methodist and a Catholic teach in the school of religion at the University of Idaho. A Presbyterian operates a coffeehouse, where he mingles among, plays games with, and prepares food for a large number of groups and individuals who would not normally attend church. A Lutheran has demonstrated how a clergyman can become involved in a situation of unrest, help to reconcile students, faculty, and community, and thus prevent another Kent State tragedy. A Disciples of Christ minister does draft counseling. A Lutheran and I have become involved in religious programming for the student body. We mingle informally with the students and discuss various issues, attend

meetings of the student senate, and help in such projects as a day-care center for the children of married students. We attend faculty forums and Bible discussion groups. We also visit the local churches, often giving the Sunday morning sermon.

Each of these men is known to belong to a particular church; but no one waves the "religious club" flag. They all preach the gospel of Christ's effectiveness for salvation, not in institutional or theoretical terms, but as a practical, demonstrable experience. Rather than compete with one another for converts, they take a broad view of the total needs of the students and teachers, and then they meet those needs in an unassuming way that appeals to the academic community. Despite varying theological views and personal habits, they respect each other's views and rights, and they continue to blend their efforts toward effective campus ministry.

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Thus the campus ministry is a constant and consistent influence, in contrast to the occasional crusade that suddenly appears on the campus, stirs up the students, and speaks only of the conversion experience without explaining how to grow in grace and mature in the Christian experience. When the crusade vanishes as fast as it appeared, it often leaves the student alone, to become more discouraged and take a dimmer view of the Church than ever.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Participation in an ecumenical venture on the secular campus does not mean sacrificing any religious principles. It is an opportunity to achieve a much broader ministry. The existing campus centers are hurting financially and are often understaffed; they welcome the assistance of competent, well-trained personnel. The Adventist church could help, both by assigning ministers to full-time work in these centers and by contributing funds.

Of course, in order to do this the church must reexamine some of its priorities for the distribution of funds and must realize that the campus ministry is just as important as some of the existing evangelistic and missionary activities. If the future is represented in the university community, then the campus minister is "where it's at." He can become an important means of discovering the ways in which the church will operate most effectively in the coming years.

The ecumenical campus venture will accomplish a much broader work than has been done in the past. It will give Adventist students a sense of security with a recognized minister and will allow them to obtain religious instruction in an academically accepted manner. There is no reason why a

Seventh-day Adventist minister could not also teach in those universities that develop a school of religion. The other churches are represented by men who teach with a broad outlook and would not object to a well-qualified Adventist on the faculty. We eliminate ourselves by our exclusiveness and limited ideas of the gospel.

The public witness of the church would be much better in such a program than if it entered the secular campus with a "come on, lost sinner" crusade or merely tended its own flock and never ministered to the total university community. *Instead of worrying about reaching certain statistical goals, the campus minister should be allowed to concentrate on sowing the seed among students and teachers, establishing good public relations, and keeping Adventist students close to the church.*

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The pastor of a church that is located in a university community should be the same type of person as the campus pastor. He should avoid "personality confrontations" (or theological polarization) with other ministers. The Adventist church can ensure this kind of pastor more easily than can some other churches, since pastoral assignments are made by the conference organization and not by the local congregation. This pastor should be a master of the pulpit who can challenge the thinking of attending students and faculty as well as feed them spiritually. He should develop a church program that will complement the university experience. Never should he view the university personnel or students as a threat and keep them at a distance; indeed, he can add vigor to the entire church by letting the students occupy positions of leadership in the church. If the church is to retain its young people, it must be a growing, dynamic force for Christianity — one which will also keep the parents and the grandparents happy.

In becoming "all things to all men" each man must work in his own armor. The campus minister's perspective and methods may not agree with everyone else's, but that is no reason to doubt his Christian experience or to conclude that God is not using him. His special ministry demands that he work in experimental and constantly varying ways, in order to meet the distinctive and changing attitudes of the university community. This is the only way he can be effective. And the church can learn from his adaptability.

So the church should develop specialized men for ministry to the secular campus, and let them work as another organ in the total body of Christ — not in competition with other forms of ministry, but in unity to preach the one gospel, the good news about Christ.