

"Only Connect":

ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION OUTSIDE NORTH AMERICA

BY NANCY LECOURT

In 1961–62, my father had a year-long sabbatical to study and travel in Europe, and the whole family came along. My brother and I attended the Adventist school at Stanborough Park, near London, in the fall, and then the four of us traveled around Europe—from the arctic circle to Tangiers—in a VW camper. When possible, we visited Adventist institutions, including a memorable lunch at a small cafeteria in Oslo, where we ordered the cherry soup—quite a culinary adventure for a 10-year-old. Imagine our dismay when we discovered that the cherries were whole—pits and all! We ended up making a game of seeing who had the most, adorning the sides of our soup plates.

These days when I travel, it doesn't really occur to me to search for the local Adventist hospital, church, or school when I am abroad. My interests have changed, it seems. What has happened to my curiosity about the world Church? Am I the exception here, or are many North American Adventists, like me, only dimly aware of what is happening in Adventism outside the US and Canada?

While I have spent my life in Adventist higher education in the NAD, I am remarkably ill-informed

about what is happening on campuses in the other world divisions. One occasionally hears tales or reads an article about huge enrollments in Brazil or Korea, of new medical and dental schools, and even law schools—but somehow, they don't register. I suspect that many are like me: mostly ignorant of the breadth and depth of Adventist education outside North America. The Adventist Church operates 118 colleges and universities, educating 167,739 students worldwide, including seven medical schools, five dental schools, and two law schools—part of the largest protestant educational system in the world.¹ Who knew? Not I.

Ginger Ketting-Weller, president of Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) in the Philippines, provides an interesting perspective. While she grew up in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore as the daughter of Adventist missionaries, she has spent her professional adult life in the United States, including Pacific Union College, Walla Walla University (where she served as academic vice president), and La Sierra University, where she was the dean of the School of Education. She went from La Sierra to AIAS in 2019, and the contrasts between the two campuses may help to

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illuminate ways North Americans can learn to look more clearly at Adventist campuses outside our often-narrow field of vision.

Ketting-Weller makes the case that we in the NAD need to be informed and interested in the successes, the challenges, and the issues that are engaging Adventists outside North America if we want them to feel a connection to us and our issues. “We need to be humble, enthusiastic, active participants in the life of the world Church. If the West is uninterested in or critical of the cultures and worldview of the rest of the world Church, then the West will not be able to influence it.” If we want them to care about us and our issues (such as women’s ordination, perhaps), we must care about them and their concerns.

Herewith, then, is an effort to connect, by looking at some of the successes, challenges, and issues that engage Adventist educators and students out there, in the wide, wide world.

A Passionate, Community Commitment to Service and Mission

One persistent theme that emerges is the strong commitment to service and mission that is deeply and authentically embedded in the institutional culture of many of these campuses—wedded to a strong sense of community. The desire to serve, to find effective means to communicate the gospel to others, seems to unify and sustain the community life, while strong social bonds provide energy for service and mission.

A striking example of a commitment to spontaneous, loving service occurred after the explosion in Beirut in August 2020. Middle East University (MEU) is 6 miles (10 kilometers) from the port, where the massive explosion left nearly 200 dead and more 300,000 homeless. John Wesley Taylor V, the associate director of the Adventist

Accrediting Association (AAA), who works with MEU, reports that “shattered glass was literally everywhere one turned. . . . MEU students, faculty and staff . . . spent weeks on-site sweeping up glass.” The MEU community delivered food and offered support to the wounded and sorrowing. Taylor shared a report from Dr. Larry Lichtenwalter, president of MEU:

As MEU students paired up and went from building to building, most of them very damaged, they exclaimed that it has never been so easy for them to enter homes. Every person they talked to was kind and receptive. Some asked them to return so they could pray with them again. Other volunteers directed MEU students to an apartment to help the residents emotionally. . . . Residents would show their home, tell their story. Students would then point them to a world where there is no more pain and destruction, and ask if we could pray with them and share a small booklet of encouragement. As one student commented “We could open the Bible to people and give them hope. We could pray with them and point them to a sustainer who never fails.”

River Plate Adventist University (UAP) in Argentina provides another example of the way spirituality and service are at the heart of the campus culture. “Service is cool at UAP,” says Martin Pita, who graduated in 2010 with a degree in theology. “Those were the best years of my life: spending time with friends, dressing up for Friday evening vespers, doing service with small missionary groups, but also playing football, board games, and tennis—as well as sitting on the curb sipping mate and chatting.” On the UAP campus, the relatively high percentage of Adventist



<https://uap.edu.ar/galeria/ya-uep-en-fotos/>

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students (77%) means that the social life and the spiritual life feel like the same thing, with friends studying, praying, and helping others together.

Pita's description of the town of Libertador San Matin reminded me a little of Loma Linda in the 1960s: a rural small town, with an Adventist hospital, medical and dental schools, market, university, elementary, and high schools, where the majority of the population is Adventist, and the Adventist Church is central to town life. Because Argentina is a Catholic country, the Adventist community is even more strongly bonded by their sense of being "different."

In 2010, two UAP medical students began to imagine large numbers of young people becoming gospel missionaries and started a program called "I Will Go." They began with a congress at UAP in 2011, and over the years it grew to include campuses in Brazil and Peru, with over 8,000 young people training to become missionaries. Eventually the enthusiasm of two medical students in Argentina became the seed for the latest General Conference strategic plan, "I Will Go 2020."²

This passion for mission struck Ketting-Weller early

on at AIIAS, one of four General Conference institutions worldwide (the others are Andrews University, Loma Linda University, and Adventist University of Africa). Most of the 714 students at AIIAS, which offers only graduate programs, are sponsored by their home divisions, and all are training to become leaders in the Adventist Church somewhere in the world. The diversity is stunning, and students cite it as AIIAS's biggest strength. Fijians, Ukrainians, and Peruvians study, work, eat, play, worship, and argue together as they pursue programs in theology, business, education, and public health, all in the English language.

The education in empathy and community that these students receive from each other as they discuss their varied beliefs and experiences within the context of so many different cultures is powerful, a strong basis for leadership in a global church. And where we in the NAD may be discussing Ellen White's psychobiography or the age of the earth over our haystacks, these students prefer to gather socially and explore ways to reach Muslims or urbanites in their home countries or mission fields. Yet there are similarities. Adventists both here and abroad are more and more motivated to also offer tangible support to their needy neighbors. At AIIAS, students started an organic vegetable garden to provide food to those who were hungry because of the pandemic, and the Chinese community delivered truckloads of rice bags to nearby families in poverty because of lost jobs—the kinds of projects North Americans warm to more and more these days. And it seems students everywhere have issues with the food in the cafeteria. Taylor reports that students in the campuses he visits request more fruits, vegetables, "and pizza!"

A similar centrality of mission to the culture of campus life is present at Adventus University Cernica, the small Adventist college in Bucharest, Romania, where 176

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(73% Adventist) students take coursework toward degrees in theology, social work, education, and nursing. The sense of community is strong, with frequent gatherings around traditional Romanian food and music, including some from the faculty and students who are Romani—the country’s second-largest minority. The campus takes pride in its academic standards and is working toward adding a master’s degree and doctoral degree in theology.

Academic Achievement

While academics vary widely around the world, based on a variety of factors, some campuses are justifiably proud of their high academic standards and achievements. On a visit prior to moving to AIIAS, Ketting-Weller was impressed by the presentations by graduate students at an international scholarly conference hosted by the graduate school. “These students could give our grad students at La Sierra a run for their money!” she recalls thinking.

Because of its academic strengths, Adventist education in some countries attracts many students of other faiths. In Brazil, for example, the three campuses of Brazil Adventist University (UNASP) enrolled 6,972 students in 2019, of whom 54% (and 74% of faculty) were Adventist. According to Julian Melgosa, an associate director of the General Conference Education department and liaison for the South American Division, Adventist education at all levels in Brazil has strong branding and a good reputation. It is well known to the average Brazilian, and many wish their children to attend Adventist schools. This respect for the quality of Adventist education carries on into the universities. Similar academic strengths can be seen at UAP, which is officially recognized by Argentina’s National Ministry of Culture and Education, and in Peru, at Peruvian Union University in Lima, where the legacy of Ana and

Fernando Stahl still creates trust in Adventist education. The university enrolled over 10,000 students in 2019; 65% of students and 80% of faculty are Adventist.

The most striking example may be the new Adventist medical school in Rwanda. The 1994 genocide and its aftermath destroyed the former campus of the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA) at Mudende, in waves of looting and occupation by refugees, described quite graphically on their website. After much difficulty and negotiation with the government, a new campus was opened in February 2006 in Kigali, the capital. In 2019, AUCA enrolled 3,092 students, of whom 34% are Adventist, as are 69% of the faculty.

Meanwhile, Rwanda itself has had a stunning transformation. According to the website of the World Bank, “Rwanda was in the middle of an economic boom prior to the . . . pandemic. Economic growth exceeded 10% in 2019.” The *New Yorker* has described Rwanda as “one of the safest and the most orderly countries in Africa,” often called the “Rwandan miracle,” the Switzerland or Singapore of Africa, because of its economic growth and its focus on cleanliness and order. In Kigali, “whisk-broom-wielding women in frocks and gloves sweep the streets at dawn” and plastic bags are illegal.

The reputation for strong academics at AUCA led the government of Paul Kagame to ask the university to start a medical school as part of the government’s ambitious plans to reach middle-income country (MIC) status by 2035. The sparkling new facilities are featured in a December 2019 video, where GC President Ted Wilson and President Kagame (whom the *New Yorker* describes as “so thin that in official photographs with visiting dignitaries it often looks as if his guests had been posed with a cardboard cutout of him”) at the opening ceremonies.³

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Access for Adventist Students

The new medical school in Rwanda is poised and ready to provide instruction and medical care to the people of Rwanda. But will Adventist students be able to afford to attend? Especially women, who are undervalued in the culture?

Lisa Beardsley-Hardy, director of the General Conference Education department and board chair for AAA, is very concerned about access to Adventist education, especially for women. She sent me a passionate email after our Zoom interview:

After we spoke, I had a meeting with the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) education director, Dr. Andrew Mutero. We both are disappointed that to date, only three SDA females are enrolled in the new medical school in Rwanda. He explained that there are two main reasons: cost and lack of STEM preparedness. He indicated that there were some females who qualified (in terms of the national medical school entrance requirements in sciences) but whose family could not afford the \$14,000 USD/year tuition. Culturally, boys are favored over girls and a family with limited resources will invest in the boys first.

The lack of access to funds for education is an important reason why Adventist enrollments tend to be low, especially in Africa and South America. Brazil, for example, has a challenging economic environment, and many Adventist young people can't afford to attend the university, according to Melgosa. While the union is very supportive and some scholarships are provided, very few countries provide anything like the federal aid we have in the US. The situation is similar in Argentina and Peru. Taylor lists "providing access to Seventh-day Adventist higher education for Adventist young people with scarce economic means" as the top challenge facing campuses.

Maintaining Adventist Culture While Welcoming Students of Other Faiths

In South Korea, Adventist enrollments are even lower, but for a different reason. At Sahmyook University (SYU), in Seoul, only 16% of the nearly 5,500 students



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were Adventist in 2019. This great enrollment success comes from the hard work and impeccable reputation created by the campus leadership, according to Melgosa, as well as from the extremely competitive public education system in South Korea. Students who do not gain access to government universities have to find a private alternative, and Sahmyook University is an attractive option. The other institution in Seoul, Sahmyook Health University (SHU), is not affiliated with SYU, but with the large Adventist hospital in Seoul, and is a health sciences institution. SYU serves 1,300 students (31% Adventist), and both institutions are highly rated in terms of academic quality by the rigorous standards of the corresponding government entities. And, according to Taylor, both institutions are intentional in conveying the gospel to students, of which a significant proportion are not Christian.

The contrasting cases of Rwanda and South Korea illustrate the two sides of this double-edged sword. While low Adventist enrollments due to lack of family resources can be tragic, it is hard not to rejoice when those of other faiths value what we have to offer. This conundrum feels a lot like the one facing campuses in the NAD. We welcome the opportunity to share Adventist education with others—while also welcoming the resources that come with increased enrollments—yet concerns are inevitably raised: why aren't more Adventists attending our campuses? Is tuition too high? And how can Adventist culture be maintained as percentages of Adventists on campuses drop?

Is there a tipping point where the Adventist culture on a campus—Sabbath observance, healthful lifestyles,

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a Biblical worldview—starts to dissipate? Ketting-Weller, whose time at La Sierra University means she has first-hand knowledge of these struggles and debates, agrees that there probably is such a “critical mass” for maintaining “the flavor of Adventism” on a campus, but doesn't know what it is. La Sierra's student body was 40% Adventist in 2019. They welcome all qualified applicants, while working hard to remain fully Adventist, providing religion coursework that communicates Adventism in an appealing way and speaks to all their students, no matter what their faith tradition. Adventist faculty are also an important factor. While SYU has low numbers of Adventist students, it reported 100% Adventist faculty in 2019. In the NAD, 56% of faculty are Adventist, though it is higher—72%—on the ten traditional baccalaureate campuses.

The need for committed Adventist faculty is acute in many places around the globe. Ketting-Weller sounded almost desperate as she asked if anyone in Choir “Zoom” Sabbath School knew a doctorally prepared professor in Education who would be willing to teach her graduate students at AIIAS. Taylor cites “sourcing qualified Seventh-day Adventist faculty for specific academic programs offered or that the institution would like to offer, frequently in STEM fields” as one of the biggest current challenges for the institutions he works with.

Yet Adventist faculty and staff are key to Adventist mission, according to Taylor:

Seventh-day Adventist education is missional—for all students, whether these come from Adventist backgrounds or otherwise. Its overarching purpose is that students might know God, understand His plan for life and learning,

and develop a positive relationship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While there are matters of critical mass and tipping point to consider, the key ingredient is intentionality for the faith development and spiritual nurture of each student. And for this to take place, Seventh-day Adventist faculty and support staff are key, as these serve as mentors and role models for students.

Only Connect

In November 2014, I was part of an AAA accrediting team visiting the Adventist University of Haiti (UAH) in Port-au-Prince. It was really my first visit to a developing country. As I waited inside the air-conditioned airport (under strict instructions not to exit the building by myself under any circumstances), I looked out on a sea of humans, held back by uniformed officers and metal barriers. After a few minutes I was greeted by a smiling young man from UAH who drove me to campus through the horrific traffic, again air-conditioned and sealed off from the realities of life in Haiti, nearly five years after the January 2010 earthquake. I was never allowed to go anywhere other than the campus and a luxury hotel in the hills overlooking the harbor. (Apparently, kidnappings were a problem.)

The campus buildings were simple and several still showed earthquake damage—except for the ones that had been completely flattened. The areas around the buildings were parklike, with wide lawns, palm trees, and carefully clipped shrubs. Ironically, it was this abundance of open space that caused one of the biggest lingering aftereffects of the earthquake: about 3,000 families, their homes reduced to rubble and aftershocks turning buildings

into death traps, poured into the campus and took up residence there. There they found water, rest rooms, grass, and shade—and these homeless survivors settled in while waiting for the government to rebuild their homes. Five years later, the campus had only very recently succeeded in regaining control of the property and restarting classes.

What were the issues the students at UAH wanted to discuss? The age of the earth, women’s ordination, how to evangelize city-dwellers? Of course not. They were worried about their transcripts. Had they all been lost in the earthquake, or the more recent floods? Was a digital copy truly being kept somewhere? Basic academic survival.

Our team did its best to provide encouragement and support as faculty and administration were working to return to “normal,” a condition that was already precarious in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. While we were there to inquire into UAH’s situation regarding Adventist accrediting standards, our real mission, I think, was to listen, and to embody the solidarity of the world Church’s higher education community with this struggling sister campus.

Today, UAH’s website shows a campus dealing with COVID, but focused on serving students, with some innovative industries in support of the mission: a *boulangerie*, a moving company, and a print shop. Programs include degrees in computer science and accounting; licenses in nursing and business; and three master’s degrees. Total enrollment is now 568, closing in on its pre-earthquake enrollment of 651. Given that enrollments are down in most places because of the pandemic, this is encouraging. However, as Taylor reports, many of the challenges at UAH remain or have become more acute. Some buildings still cannot be utilized due to the earthquake, and political turmoil has resulted in the suspension of classes for extended periods. Through it all, the committed faculty and staff have developed incredible resilience.

I still think about the people I met there and wonder how they are doing. We prayed together, ate the appetizing food in their cafeteria, discussed their problems, listened carefully to their thoughts and plans, and laughed together as our driver claimed to enjoy navigating the amazing traffic. In other words, *we connected*.

It seems like a good place to start.

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