It was my first registration as an academic dean. The auditorium had already begun to fill with students who had come to register for a new academic year. Then I was given a dose of reality in my new context. The registrar pulled me over to the side and said it was the academic dean’s job, at the beginning of every academic year, to announce our no-jewelry policy to the students. In fact, part of the message was to inform them that non-compliant students would not be allowed to complete their registration. And sure enough, each student was receiving an external inspection to see if he/she was wearing jewelry. Those who wore jewelry either had to take it off or wait to register at a later time.

I was literally shocked at the news. The thought of keeping students from registering because they were wearing earrings, bracelets, or necklaces seemed foreign and not very welcoming to me. But, as the new dean, I wasn’t about to enter into a discussion about how we should enforce the university standards. Grudgingly, I made the announcement, gave my warning, and prayed inwardly that the students would cooperate and not walk out and select another school. Not a happy prospect for a tuition-driven institution. I also figured that as soon as the students were registered, they would put their jewelry back on, which, of course, they did.

Let us illustrate from another angle. Often my colleagues in the administration and I attended pastors’ meetings to promote the institution and get the support of the church leaders. I’ll never forget the reaction of one pastor at one of these meetings. The pastor publicly expressed his dismay for what, in his mind, was a declining situation with respect to the standards of the church at the university. He had recently visited the cam-
pus and was appalled to see a few women and some men wearing earrings, sleeveless shirts, and short pants. He questioned the administration’s commitment to Adventist philosophy and values. Finally, he asserted that he would not endorse sending his own children or the youth from his church because, in his mind, the institution was not maintaining the church’s standards.

I couldn’t help but think of the verse that says: “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7, NIV). What was also disturbing to me was the implicit assumption that the spirituality and religious commitment was high if the pastor had not seen anyone wearing earrings, sleeveless shirts, shorts, or seen any belly buttons. Clearly, this line of rearguard action does not philosophically represent our theological understanding and may, in fact, turn our young people against the church.

In 1993, the distinguished Adventist church historian, Dr. George R. Knight, penned the following words:

The denomination (Seventh-day Adventists) has no systematic means for either reviewing or developing standards that face the issues of modern culture. Our individual and collective responses to issues of value and standards are still ad hoc. Instead of consciously crafting a biblically viable set of standards and values, Adventists and their church generally merely react to current crises and problems that force a decision. . . . One result is that the denomination too often is fighting a rearguard action against the erosion of its standards. (p. 205)

He goes on to say that this “predicament may be ‘tolerable’ to those of us adults who have dedicated our lives to Adventist Christianity, but it is leaving increasingly larger numbers of Adventist young people cold” (p. 206).

Knight challenges us to take a more reasoned approach and to avoid a rearguard reaction like the one I just shared. The in-your-face-enforcement approach may appease our consciences (at least we’re trying to do something), but it brings out the worst in us and in the students. Most importantly, it distorts the message of the gospel. It may achieve
short-term compliance but puts at risk the probability of life-long commitment.

There are three ways to respond to the challenge of maintaining distinctive boundaries. The first is to continue the in-your-face-enforcement approach to fight a rearguard action. In my opinion, this is neither a workable nor desirable solution. The second approach is to ease up on the standards, keeping the ones with the clearest consensus and de-emphasizing or eliminating those that lack support. The third approach is to critically re-appraise the standards of the church in light of biblical principles and to renew our understanding of the communal nature of the church.

In this presentation, I’d like to elaborate on the third option and argue that Adventism needs to embrace its standards through a recovery of a communal consciousness that will help enhance the commitment of its young people and envision a more radical mission of service in society.

First, let’s look a bit closer at the challenge before us.

Research Findings on Education and Social Awareness

In the last decade, we have learned many important things about the impact of Christian education. Overall, the news is very good for the role that Adventist education plays in the life of young people. The Valuegenesis research project has provided invaluable information on the state of contemporary Adventism and the role of education. Research among Latino Adventists corroborates the positive impact of education (Hernandez & Dudley, 2000).

Recently, the initial findings of one of the most significant studies of American congregations, the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project (CCSP), was unveiled. Headed by Carl Dudley and David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, it has been in progress for over four years, involved more than 40 denominations, and included approximately 20,000 congregations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America was one of the participating groups. A total of 413 Adventist churches participated with a 51% return rate. The Adventist data indicate
that religious vitality and growth are strongly correlated with Adventist education.

The most significant study of all is a longitudinal research project of a cohort of Adventist youth. In his book, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*, the dean of Adventist social scientists, Dr. Roger Dudley, reports that

information gathered during 10 years is a ringing testimony to the benefits of Christian education. Those attending Adventist academies and colleges were much more likely to remain faithful Adventists than those enrolled in secular schools. These young people (1) were still church members after the 10 years, (2) were regularly in attendance at divine worship services, and (3) never dropped out or become inactive during the period of the study. They also had a higher percentage who showed mature faith.” (p. 160)

Certainly this is cause for celebration. Yet, despite all of the effort that families, teachers, pastors, and churches put into socializing our young people to belong to our community, between 40% to 50% of our young people decide to leave its ranks (Dudley, 2000). This is truly alarming.

The above research raises a number of concerns; however, two stand out: (1) the declining support for certain standards among youth, and (2) the lack of social consciousness. The reason for selecting these two is that empirically it has been shown that those adhering to the standards of the church, particularly the “big four” (dancing, movie theater, jewelry, rock music), will exhibit a strong, long-term commitment and loyalty to the church (Dudley, 2000). In addition, a service orientation has been found to be the strongest predictor of faith maturity (Dudley, 1992). Furthermore, recent research among Evangelicals confirms the important role that these two factors play in religious communities. Christian Smith (1998), in his study of American Evangelicalism, proposed a theory of religious vitality (called the subcultural identity theory) to explain the vitality of the American evangelical movement. He found that two factors determine why Evangelicalism is thriving. The first factor is maintaining a clear distinction within a pluralistic environment. The second is a sustained, active pres-
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ence in and engagement with the surrounding culture (Smith, 1998). Smith described the role of these two factors, within fundamentalism, in such a way that also describes quite aptly the current experience of Adventism:

Without this orientation toward active, involved social presence and engagement, fundamentalism has become somewhat detached from the potential challenges of the world, less compelled to be always on guard, rallying for action, strategizing to have an influence, and mobilizing resources to counter threats. Fundamentalism’s defensive separatism also reduces its chances of encountering self-identity-reinforcing exposure to and tension with hostile outgroups. Relatively safely protected in a subcultural cocoon, fundamentalism has been able to afford to grow somewhat relaxed, disengaged, inward-looking. The felt challenge of mission, burden for history and the world, and urgent need to response to threats and crises—all of which work to energize evangelicalism—begin in fundamentalism to grow dull. The edge of fundamentalism’s religious vitality wears off. Under these conditions, defending fundamental doctrinal truths can easily devolve into merely embalming them. The challenge of world evangelism can easily drift into routinized door-to-door “soul winning” rituals. And rather narrow lists of activities that define “worldliness” can begin to render a host of other culturally mainstream practices available to be uncritically absorbed. Thus, fundamentalism’s subculturally constructed isolation and disengagement eventually produce detectable traces of religious passivity and slackening. (Smith, 1998, 146)

Thus, by understanding these two empirically and theoretically grounded factors and suggesting a way to strengthen them, we hope to renew Adventism’s spiritual vitality and noticeable public presence in years to come.

Let us then consider the findings related to the first issue—standards.

The research findings on standards are mixed. Adventist young people on the whole are supportive of Adventist standards. All the evidence from the Valuegenesis 1 & 2 surveys and Roger Dudley’s longitudinal study are conclusive with respect to what Adventist young
people believe about Adventist standards, at least within the North American context. Significant and consistent agreement exists among Adventist young people regarding the Adventist standards on

1. Tobacco
2. Drugs
3. Alcohol
4. Sexual purity
5. Sabbath keeping
6. Modest appearance

The agreements range between 75% to 95% and is very consistent with their behavior. However, also quite consistent and unanimous are the disagreements with the traditional prohibitions against the following Adventist standards:

1. Jewelry
2. Rock music
3. Movie theaters
4. Dancing

The agreement on these four standards ranges between 8% to 35% of those surveyed. Clearly, an overwhelming majority of Adventist young people in the United States feel that these “four” standards aren’t relevant any more and should not be part of the social boundaries that distinguish Adventism.

Interestingly enough, over the last ten years the research findings are consistent in identifying these four standards (dancing, movie theaters, rock music, and jewelry) as the ones least supported by Adventists. In fact, back in 1992, Roger Dudley in *Faith in the Balance*, declared:

The church must not merely preach standards but must help youth discover for themselves to what standards they should commit and why these standards are worth their allegiance. This is a call for renewed effort to make the standards that the church promotes clearly Christ-
Centered, Biblically based, and culturally relevant. This is not an easy task. The implications are that the church just might make a few changes in the areas of standards. (p. 161)

Roger Dudley is not advocating doing away with any particular standard. However, he clearly recognizes the immensity of the problem by suggesting that in order “to affect the needed transformation of our youth’s vis-à-vis church standards will take all the creativity and energy the church possesses, nothing less will suffice. We cannot afford the consequences of letting events take their natural course” (Dudley, 1992, 279). He further suggests that, to reverse the current trend, we will need to engage in a “massive selling campaign to convince the youth to reverse their beliefs” (p. 150). This is precisely what I want to advocate in this presentation. However, before we get there we need to ask a crucial question. What are the consequences of allowing the natural course of events to unfold? Can a redefinition of standards lead to a decline in religious commitment? What is the cost involved in reducing the tension between Adventism’s subculture and modern society?

The Cost of Vanishing Boundaries

For some people, the “big four” of Adventist standards are no longer reasonable to maintain. Times have changed and they no longer make sense. Rather than trying to keep young people from participating in these practices (since they are already involved in doing them), some leaders argue, we should be focusing our energies on teaching our youth to make better decisions individually. However, will relaxing the standards in order to make them more reasonable and palatable—thus less costly—to modern sensibilities lead to a more vibrant faith? Earlier we mentioned that Adventists could choose a second option in response to the problem of standards—affirm some and eliminate others. Fortunately, we have a case study of a denomination that did just that. And the results aren’t enviable.

In fact, they are devastating. Recent research shows that as mainline denominations relaxed their traditional observance of the Sabbath and other time-consuming practices, members were deprived of the benefits of belonging to such a religious community—the distinctive sense of identity
and communal belonging. This situation led to a continuing precipitous pattern of membership decline. Between 1960 and 1990, the following mainline denominations had significant membership decline: Methodists—39%; Presbyterians—34%; United Church of Christ—48%; and Episcopalians—46% (Stark & Finke, 2000). Let’s examine the findings from one specific denomination—the Presbyterians.

A recent study among modern Presbyterianism proposed the following scenario:

What if Presbyterians put pressure on their children not to marry anyone outside the mainline denominations, not to get a liberal education that challenges received doctrines, not to travel or study in other cultures (except perhaps in mission work), not to live or work closely with people of other faiths, and not to think for themselves in religious matters? Further, what if there were lifestyle rules concerning Sabbath observance, dress codes, alcohol use, and sexual behavior that clearly demarcated Presbyterians and set them off from others in society? Nothing like has happened because for decades Presbyterians have been opposed to all of this. They have stood for openness, ecumenism, critical scholarship without restrictions, adoption of science and higher learning, cosmopolitanism, and freedom of conscience. For decades the majority have made choices that aided their children to be world-conscious, open, autonomous, and (as a by-product) not committed to the specific traditions of the church. The children have asked over and over what is distinctive about Presbyterianism—or even about Protestantism—and why they should believe it or cherish it. The answer has apparently not been very clear. . . . A hundred years ago Presbyterians were expected to observe the Sabbath strictly, to abstain from using alcoholic beverages, to avoid “wordly amusements” in general, to dress modestly, to conduct family devotions, not to practice birth control, and not to seek a divorce unless their spouses had deserted them or committed adultery. By the mid-1960’s all these disciplines had fallen by the wayside. (Hoge et al., 192)
Today Presbyterians should not bemoan the lack of faith and church commitment exhibited by their youth, since they have no one to blame but themselves. No outside power forcibly pulled their children away from the faith. No conquering army or hostile missionaries destroyed the tradition. The Presbyterians made the decisions themselves, on one specific issue after another, over the decades. They repeatedly chose openness and cosmopolitanism. (Hoge et al., 200)

Clearly then, the second option presents such high risks to Adventism’s future that those who want to propose it should look carefully, closely, and prayerfully at the empirical evidence to see a possible mirror image of what could happen.

The third option seeks to revitalize Adventist standards and maintain distinctive social boundaries. What does the research say about religious movements that maintain distinct boundaries?

According to Dean Kelley in his now classic study in the sociology of religion, “What costs nothing, accomplishes nothing. If it costs nothing to belong to such a community, it can’t be worth much” (Kelley, 1977, 52). He described strong religious communities as having “shoulder-to-shoulder solidarity” among those who have committed themselves to the movement. The followers “are linked together in a bond of mutually supportive, likeminded, equally devoted fellow believers, who reinforce one another in times of weakness, persecution, and doubt” (p. 51). They must also be willing to subordinate their personal desires and ambitions to the shared goals of the group. Strong religions require not only commitment and solidarity, but also what Kelley refers to as “traits of strictness.” They need mechanisms for reassuring their members of the exclusive truth of their teachings, for enforcing orthodox professions of belief, and for maintaining distinctive standards of conduct and demeanor that set the followers apart from outsiders. Unless the youth are firmly socialized into the movement’s tenets and standards, the strength of the religious community will eventually ebb away. As Kelley put it, “A culture which cannot hand on its shared meanings through time will not survive” (p. 41).

Since Kelley’s book was published, many have followed his theoretical lead and empirically confirmed that, indeed, religious communities that maintain distinct cultural, ideological, and social boundaries—and thus
exist in high tension with their surrounding culture—will experience growth in membership and religious vitality (Sargeant, 2000; Smith, 1998; Stark & Finke, 2000).

The Cost of Depleted Social Awareness
The “Blind Spot”

The second factor that we identified earlier as being critical to ensuring religious vitality is the critical role that social awareness plays. Despite historically strong commitment to social ethics and world mission (Pearson, 1990), modern day Adventism suffers from what Roger Dudley (1992) has called the “blind spot” in Adventist education. Perhaps the most important finding is that with increased Adventist education, the following variables decreased: horizontal faith, evangelistic activity, value of service to others, and pro-social behavior. The common theme in these four variables is concern for others and service to society—in short the mission of the church. This finding led Dudley to ask, “Is there something about Adventist education that leads its recipients to become self-centered and fail to develop a love for humanity?” (p. 249). He refers to this finding as “a serious blind spot” (p. 279).

Among the significant findings from the Hartford Institute research project, mentioned earlier, is that when compared to other denominations, Adventists are less likely to be involved in most kinds of community-service activities.

Ten years after the first Valuegenesis survey was done, a second survey has just been completed. Over 11,000 children from Adventist academies in North American participated in the Valuegenesis-2 study. The research, led by Dr. Bailey Gillespie, provides once again invaluable information on the state of the Adventist educational system. Preliminary findings show that the “blind spot” is still there and growing.

Furthermore, findings from Dudley’s longitudinal study shows that Adventist Christian education has a more positive impact than public education on most measures with the exception of one—social concern (Dudley, 2000, 160). Adventist youth who attend public schools develop greater social awareness and responsibility than those in Adventist schools.

I’d like to suggest that the reason for this “blind spot” is because we have lost, or rather depleted, the reservoir of our communal vision and
ethic. We have essentially accommodated to the dominant values of expressive individualism, which is the drug of choice of American culture. The challenge for Adventism in the new millennium is to recover its communal consciousness.

What is the reason for this “blind spot”? 

**Modernity’s Impact on Communal Consciousness**

Of the multiple forces in modern life that impact religious organizations, I take up only one here, the prevailing presence of individualism. It is natural for us to take our cultural values, traditions, and ideologies for granted as unquestionable aspects of our daily lives. Riding along within one’s culture is like riding a bike with the wind. As it carries us along, we hardly notice it’s there. When we try riding against culture—violating its expectations—we feel its force. And individualism is a silent, invisible force affecting contemporary Adventism.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his associates concluded that many Americans lack the habits of the heart and the cultural tools that are conducive to living in community. Time and again, Bellah observed that people defined “personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation. Shunning conformity, commitment, and obligation, modern individualists prefer to define their own standards and do as they please” (p. 163). Bellah and his associates go on to say that “individualism may have grown cancerous—that it may be threatening the survival of freedom itself” (p. 5). The “cancer” metaphor used by these researchers suggests that if allowed to grow in a healthy body, it can spread and lead to premature death.

The price we pay for radical individualism is the corrosion of communal well-being. It develops an ethic that focuses on the individual as the fundamental unit of human existence (Hunter, 2000). Groups and relationships are all right if we want to join them and if they provide us some personal benefit or meet a personal need, but otherwise we don’t join because they won’t “meet my needs.” If self-fulfilment and satisfaction are the primary concern, there is no need for group allegiance and social con-
nectedness (Putnam, 2000). Marriage is only convenient to the extent that it enhances your self-fulfillment. No wonder half of all marriages end up in divorce.

The impact of individualism within the religious context is particularly devastating. It transforms religious sentiment, values, and ideas and reduces them to individual choices and preferences above the concerns of the community and the larger good (Hunter, 1987). It can even alter our understanding of the biblical text and our understanding of salvation history and other critical teachings such as the doctrine of the church.

Thus, I am arguing, Adventism’s individualistic ethic, among other things, has prevented it from recognizing that cultural boundaries (lifestyle practices and standards) have implications beyond the individual (Dudley & Hernandez, 1992).

Let’s examine more closely the interconnection between individualism and our biblical understanding, particularly as it relates to the doctrine of the church.

**Individualism and Religious Understanding**

In an as-yet unpublished manuscript titled “Believing, Behaving and Belonging,” Adventist theologian Dr. Richard Rice presents a most compelling theological reflection exploring the impact of individualism on theological reflection, particularly on our understanding of the church. Inspired by his commitment to the church, he makes a strong biblical and theological case for the priority that “belonging” has on the Christian life. It is his hope that by recovering the priority of “belonging-to-the-church,” young people’s love and commitment for the church will be re-ignited. His many years of service as a professor in theology has led him to observe that

It’s not hard to see why such an attitude (individualism) has such drastic effects on our religious perspective, especially on our understanding of the church. If the individual is the final measure of everything, then the church is reduced to a voluntary association whose sole function is to meet our individual needs and makes us feel good about ourselves. This is miles from the New Testament vision of the church, but unfortunately it is not far from the way many of us think about it. Our deep-
seated individualism makes it difficult for us, not only to appreciate the value of the church, but even to understand what the church involves. (p. 18)

The doctrine that is most affected by the influence of individualism is the Christian understanding of the church. For many, church is like a spiritual health club; “for those who need it, it can be a valuable resource. But for those who don’t, it’s unnecessary.” As many of today’s college students see it, the church is completely optional. While church membership may be highly beneficial for some, it is less helpful to others, and it is not a requirement for anyone. It is certainly not essential to our salvation. Many say: “Our identity as Christians comes from Jesus Christ, not from some religious organization.” This church-optional view fits squarely within the individualistic outlook we have been describing.

It sees personal religion as primary, original, central, and essential. And the church as secondary, derivative, peripheral, incidental. Salvation is something that happens between individuals and God. After they receive the gift of salvation, people may join a religious community if they choose to, but that is only a consequence of salvation. It is not a part of what it means to be saved. (Rice, p. 26)

This line of thinking, which is pervasive within Adventism, has profound consequences (Dudley & Hernandez, 1992). If all that matters is your relationship with God, then that’s all that matters. What the church thinks or adopts as standards is simply irrelevant if it doesn’t meet my own expectations, for after all, it doesn’t affect my own personal religious experience. “So,” our young people tell us, “going to the theater doesn’t affect me spiritually, so why does the church continues to insist on this standard?” Personal preference and choice become paramount for many contemporary Adventists. That’s why at many Adventist colleges and universities the debate over requiring chapel attendance has been raging on year after year. Students argue that they should be left free to choose whether they want to attend chapel or not. Let me ask you this: How would a communitarian perspective respond to this dilemma?

It shouldn’t surprise us to see Adventist youth and adults challeng-
ing and questioning church teachings and standards. Through their cultural and religious socialization, they have been taught to think and act in precisely those ways. We have been taught to view conversion, justification, and sanctification by ourselves. We talk about a personal relationship with Christ in total independence from belonging to a community of faith. And in so doing, we made a stark distinction between personal salvation and the communion of believers. Thus, Adventists lack the theological tools—in the form of a communitarian understanding of Christianity—to counter the damaging influence of modern culture.

**Recovering the Priority of Belonging**

What is the impact of religious individualism on social consciousness? The research findings of sociologist Robert Wuthnow show that those who said they develop their own spirituality independent of any church were less likely than those within the church to value caring for the needy and contributing time to charitable activities. If they attended church regularly, the people claimed more often to experience divine love, and the more time they volunteered. Wuthnow goes on to say “that spirituality begins to move people toward being compassionate only when a threshold of involvement in some kind of collective religious activity has been reached” (pp. 10-13). But not only does the do-it-yourself piety not yield compassionate action, but it also contributes to the decline of traditional denominations. University of Massachusetts sociologist N. J. Demerath concludes that individualism is a centrifugal organizational force that leads people away from commitment and community and toward privatization (p. 461).

Clearly, then, both maintaining distinct social boundaries (standards) and acting on behalf of one’s neighbor and desiring to change society are undermined by excessive individualism. I’d like to suggest that the solution, in part, depends in our recovering a communitarian consciousness—rediscovering what it means to be church. But it won’t be easy. Rice cautions:

It is not surprising that people raised in this milieu (individualism) have little appreciation for the corporate dimension of religion. It would be surprising if they did. Start with the conviction that salvation is essentially a private experience, something that happens solely between God
and the individual person, and church will remain forever secondary; and if secondary, then optional, and if optional, then ultimately dispensable. And that is exactly the attitude we are facing today” (p. 26).

Emphasizing community belonging accentuates a relational ethic that should be at the core of any strategy for retaining and attracting members to our community of faith. Let’s once and for all take away our blinders and recognize what the research has been telling us time and time again—that people don’t leave the church for theological or doctrinal reasons, but rather because of a lack of a relational community. Notice Dudley’s conclusion on this point:

The most critical aspect and the most challenging for the church is incorporating the horizontal dimension of the relationship of fellow humans. If we do not love one another, we cannot make real the vertical dimensions of our relationship with God. . . . The point is that youth apostasy is rarely doctrinal. Young people do not drop out because of intellectual difficulties with Adventist teachings. They may be disturbed, however, by the manner in which these teachings are applied and enforced.” (p. 195)

Our youth are “convicted of the doctrines. Yet what most often has made the difference in membership retention has been relationships, ownership, and an environment of unconditional acceptance and love” (Dudley, 2000, 119).

In 1 Cor 12:28, Paul uses the “corporal” metaphor to show that we are really parts of the same body, and that we need each other for our very survival. It is only in togetherness that any of us have spiritual life. So, it is a spiritual as well as a biological principle: nothing survives in isolation. Separated from each other, members of the church have no more life than severed body parts. Connecting to the body is not just the best environment for spiritual flourishing, it is our only chance of survival. But not only is the church basic to our spiritual survival, it is also basic to our spiritual identity. Many are the instances where the individual is prior to the community. We establish our identity independently and then bring it to the group. But in this case, it is the other way around. In the church, the
identity of the group is prior to the identity of individuals. What we are
together as members of the church is more fundamental, more important,
and more influential than what we are individually. “In other words, we
don’t make the church what it is, the church makes us what we are. The
church is not a community we create, but a community that creates us”
(Rice, p. 33).

**Consequences to a Renewed Communal Consciousness**

Within this context then, Adventist behavioral standards are both a
sign of the inner life and a sign of our social public ethic. Recovering a
communitarian language and ethics, as we have suggested, allows us to
recognize that Christianity contains many cultural tools which could lend
themselves to profoundly alternative social practices and radical social cri-
tiques of mainstream modern society and culture, which stands in need of
redemption. For example, as we have already noted, Adventists could
construct a critique of Western society’s individualism by invoking the so-
cial interdependence of created humanity, the strongly collectivistic nature
of God’s ideal ancient Hebrew society, and the profoundly collectivist na-
ture of the New Testament view of sin and cosmic redemption (Wallis,
1984). Against the glaring disparities in wealth and power of the existing
global economic and political system, Christians could proclaim as norma-
tive the created earth and its fruits as God’s gift for the welfare of all
humanity (DeVos, et. al. 1991), the socially revolutionary teachings of the
Sermon on the Mount, the Apostle Paul’s egalitarian approach to eco-
nomic differences between early Church communities (see, for example,
the Apostle Paul’s teachings in 2 Corinthians 8: 13-15), and the myriad
New Testament teachings against excessive wealth and power (Sider, 1997).

Against the persistent attitudinal and structural racism and sexism,
Christians could employ doctrines such as the organic unity of created
humanity, the universal love of God, the social, division-destroying nature
of Christ’s justification, and the ideal of harmony-amid-diversity in the church
to forge profoundly different racial and gender practices within Christian
communities (Mott, 1982; Yoder, 1994). Against an American society whose
mass-consumer capitalism, generally, and advertising and television industries, specifically, can be seen as acting as “pushers” for a culture of rampant addiction to all manner of toys, drugs, and novel experiences, Christians could employ cultural tools to model abstinence at all levels and call for a radically alternative society of spiritually rooted contentment, self-control, and moderation (Foster, 1978, 1981; Sider, 1997).

Let’s be clear that the Adventist criterion for every standard and value is its effectiveness in enabling people to internalize Christian principles and the loving character of Christ (Rice, 1993). Standards and values are not ends in themselves, but a means to an end. And that end is to accept by faith Christ’s saving grace and reflect His character and participate in His radical mission to the world (Scriven, 1983).

When Adventist standards are viewed from a communitarian perspective, they take on a new meaning that makes them both individually and socially relevant. Take for example, abstinence from at-risk behaviors (i.e., alcohol, smoking, drugs, and sex before marriage). These standards can be viewed not just as private behaviors (adding more years of quality healthy life) but also, and most fundamentally, as public acts. The public testimony and collective action of a world-wide community that practices abstinence can be a powerful influence for social good (Rouse, 1997).

Sabbatarianism is fundamentally a communal experience. It is not just about keeping the seventh day holy because God commanded it (a counter-cultural act in and of itself), but it is about a day to experience social equality and justice. It’s a day to celebrate and affirm creation—the environment. Thus, the public manifestation of Sabbath keeping should lead us to private and communal actions that seek to protect and enhance the environment (Baldwin, 2001). In addition, Isaiah 58, an often-quoted biblical chapter in Adventism, when interpreted with non-individualistic eyes, allows us to recognize the social meaning of the Sabbath—that feeding, alleviating the suffering, and being in solidarity with the poor and outcasts implies true Sabbath keeping.

To abstain from wearing “ornamental” jewelry is to participate in a critique of our culture’s materialism and consumerism. The principles which guide this standard—simplicity, modesty, and economy—also have profound social implications.
The standard against attending a movie theater, also when analyzed through the communitarian perspective, can provide a more relevant rationale. A reappraisal of this standard begins with a cultural, economic, and religious critique. The evidence is quite clear, movie theaters represent the economic backbone of the movie industry. As such, it represents the major medium in determining both the content, audience appeal, and success of its products. Furthermore, the content of a good majority of the films can safely be labeled as being counter to Christian values and principles. On occasion, a gem will surface that is worth watching, but very rarely. Recent discussions on the impact of violence and indecent material on children and families has heightened the public’s awareness of the moral dilemma posed by the film industry. Consumer boycotts have been used successfully as a tool for social change in many historical situations, most prominently exemplified in the civil-rights movement of the 60s and the apartheid movement of the 80s. Are there strong economic and moral reasons for a Christian community like ours to boycott the movie theater? Doing so can represent a strategic way to leverage a desired change.

Chicano labor leader, Cesar Chavez, who led a nation wide labor movement had this to say about the power of a consumer boycott: “The consumer boycott is the only open door in the dark corridor of nothingness down which farm workers have had to walk for many years. It is a gate of hope through which they expect to find the sunlight of a better life for themselves and their families.” Did boycotting grapes (that small insignificant fruit) by thousands of students and activists across America help bring about dramatic changes in the labor conditions of thousands of farm workers? Did boycotting Coca-cola, Shell products and other multinational companies help contribute to the undoing of the apartheid system in South

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1 On this issue, see the excellent work by Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Jewelry in the Bible*, where he makes the distinction between ornamental and functional jewelry, and suggests that we apply three principles—simplicity, modesty, and economy—to our decision making about what is functional jewelry. See also Roy Adams’s book review “JEWELRY IN THE BIBLE: What You Always Wanted to Know but Were Afraid to Ask,” *Adventist Review* (9 November 2000).
Africa? Can boycotting addictive substances (drugs, alcohol, and tobacco) and the movie theater help bring about significant social change? The answer to all three questions is a resounding yes!

**Conclusion**

The moment is ripe for the Adventist community to embrace a bold vision of social engagement. In a recent national survey by Public Agenda, titled *For Goodness’ Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life*, a majority of Americans say that religion is one of the few antidotes to the moral decline that they observe in the nation today. The majority of Americans feel that if people were more religious there would be a significant reduction in crime, teen pregnancy, divorce, greed, uncaring parents, and unfeeling neighbors. In fact, people equate religion with personal ethics and morality. As a result, seven in ten (70%) Americans want religion’s influence on American society to grow. Clearly, a renewed opportunity for “prophetic minority communities,” (Provonsha, 1993) like Adventists can play a transforming role in modern society.

For Adventists, tradition and standards have primarily been seen as private demonstrations that reveal the inner state of our spiritual lives. E. G. White (1964) stated, “The external appearance is an index to the heart” (*That I May Know Him*, 312). We have argued that “external appearance” can also be an index to our communal public life.

Adventists understand that “In true education, the selfish ambition, the greed for power, the disregard for the rights and needs of humanity, that are the curse of our world, find a counter-influence” (*Education*, 1903/1942, 225,226, emphasis mine).

It is, in part, the responsibility of our educational system to create that counter-influence that Ellen White talked about. And I have suggested that a major part of this counter-influence involves rediscovering a communal consciousness.

A wonderful book was published this last year titled, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell (2000). His basic thesis is that little things can
make a big difference. Sometimes big changes follow from small events, and major changes in our society often happen suddenly and unexpectedly. Ideas, behavior, messages, and products, he argues, often spread like outbreaks of infectious disease. He shows that just by scrubbing off graffiti from sub-way trains and replacing broken windows in the inner city can trigger a tipping-point effect that can dramatically reduce crime. The Tipping Point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point that leads to dramatic social change.

Ellen White (1903/1942) was on to something when she said that “With such an army of workers as our youth, rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Savior might be carried to the whole world!” (Education, 271).

Can Adventism provoke a tipping point?

It was Margaret Mead who said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (in Quinn, 1999, p. 5).

This, my friends and colleagues, is my vision for Adventism.

Bibliography


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