

SERVICE LEARNING IN ADVENTIST COLLEGES

BY ERNEST J. BURSEY

The sizable number of students applying for task force and student-missionary calls at Adventist colleges in North America shows that the impulse for service is alive among our student population. The willingness of Adventist administrators and faculty to accept a salary far below their counterparts in public education and even church-related campuses also demonstrates a profound commitment to service.

Virtually every Seventh-day Adventist college in North America publishes a mission statement in the academic bulletin extolling service to God and humankind as the *raison d'être* for the academic program.¹ Surprisingly, however, a study of Adventist college bulletins reveals that most students are left on their own to figure out whether, or how, their college education connects to the life goal of service that is extolled in the mission statement. Although student missionary and task-force positions are made available, ser-



vice and its academic counterpart,³ service learning, are largely ignored in the course descriptions in Adventist college bulletins.

Meanwhile, a wave of interest in service learning and community service is being seen on many college and university campuses across the United States, in both the private and public sectors. Most departments on Adventist campuses could find an academic counterpart in American higher education that has introduced service learning into the curriculum and school life. To take only one instance among many, students at Rutgers University choose from two dozen service-learning courses spanning 12 academic and professional disciplines, including art, English, and political science. Rutgers also sponsors a residence center for 42 students of different backgrounds who share a commitment to community service and citizenship. Service-related courses remain a highly recommended option at Rutgers with one exception—

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service has become part of the required curriculum in the honors program.

The recent surge of interest in community service by American institutions

of higher education has been matched by the growth of organizations like Campus Compact³ and Partnership for Service-Learning.⁴ Even the National Society for Experiential Education devotes considerable attention to service learning.

How should the relatively small system of Adventist colleges in North America relate to this current phenomenon linking community with college life? Can Adventist institutions of higher education contribute to giving service a philosophical footing based on the Adventist Christian tradition?

Proponents of the Western tradition have described the task of higher education as the enabling of the individual to participate in intellectual discourse. The student acquires a body of knowledge, particularly in the humanities, and develops the critical faculties necessary to participate in a democratic society. This responsibility to the wider society that grows out of such an education does not require a transcendent



A Pacific Union College (Angwin, California) student prepares ground for landscaping at a local elementary school during a recent service day.



Students at La Sierra University (Riverside, California) remove graffiti from a local bridge during Community Service Day, 1994.

faith or even a Christian perspective.

A variation on that approach can be found among Christian teachers who see their task as enabling students to examine their religious inheritance. The expectation, or hope, is that the next generation will intellectually embrace some reconstructed version of that inheritance and remain actively involved in the church.

Yet Christian leaders have often been wary of an education centered on critical inquiry or one that elevates the humanities. A student's critical acumen can deconstruct a religious belief without putting the pieces together again. The nurture of religious experience can be overlooked or privatized in an intellectual environment. Partly in reaction, the trustees of Christian colleges have been prone to describe the central task of higher Christian education as the fostering of personal commitment to the beliefs of the Christian faith. As a result, teachers are expected to be authority figures who make a case for the

Christian worldview, while publicly modeling a life of worship and piety.

A more satisfactory synthesis can be gained by recognizing that the primary function of a Christian college is to prepare young men and women for their vocation of service. The satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, the mastery of a body of knowledge, the development of the individual, the acquisition of marketplace skills, and even the retention of denominational loyalties, while valid as goals of higher education, must not take the central place. The core curriculum and the course work of each major must be developed in the light of the central goal of preparing the individual for service.

The rationale for emphasizing service lies deep in the essence of Christian faith. According to the New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers, all stand gifted and mutually obligated to one another. In the words of Scripture:

[Christ] "gave gifts to men"; he ap-

pointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of CHRISTIAN SERVICE, to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11, 12, TEV, emphasis supplied).

The biblical material is rich in support for service to the larger community beyond the edges of the church. Jesus' parables about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21); the directives of what the Lord requires (Micah 6:8); the description of the true fast of the Lord (Isaiah 58)—all provide firm footing for extending compassion beyond the circle of believers.

Putting Service Into Learning

Including service experiences within our curriculum can help our students dispel some misconceptions that hamper their intellectual and personal achievements.

First, service learning can help us and our students to overcome misconceptions about power. College students feel impotent to affect the affairs of the country and the church, which seem to be out of their hands. As a result, they feel diminished loyalty to both. At least part of the blame for this detachment comes from the way adults have taught them.

College faculty members spend years preparing in a specific area of academic interest. We come across to our students as formidable in our grasp of what we teach. Imagine yourself as a student, attending one class after another, being reminded over and over of how little you know and how much there is to learn. Try weighing a general biology or organic chemistry textbook that students pack to class today, compared to what you carried to class a few years ago. Today, students know they are experts at little or nothing. I find that the brightest students are the most likely to feel overwhelmed by how much there is to read and learn.

It is wrong to let our students see themselves as powerless. "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to



Visiting an area nursing home was one of the activities in which students from Southern College of SDA (Collegedale, Tennessee) participated for Community Service Day.

that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do.”⁷

While college students may not master the range of an academic field, they can acquire a sense of their power to contribute to the well-being of others. Through innovative projects of their own design, they can experience the exhilaration of creative thought and action. Through community service, they can sense the strength that comes from working together for a worthwhile cause.⁸

Second, service learning can counter the wrong line students are being fed about competition. Service learning presumes a cooperative mode of interaction. I would not deny the legitimate role of competition, but it is the secondary rhythm in the music of life, like the waves on the surface of the sea. In real life, we are more prone to make

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recital of battlefields and winning generals to giving “broad, comprehensive views of life” that help the student “to understand something of its relations and dependencies, how wonderfully we are bound together in the great brotherhood of society and nations, and to how great an extent the oppression or degradation of one member means loss to all.”⁷

There is only so much that our students can learn about service and compassion and connecting inside our classroom. The so-called under-educated and uneducated can teach us and our students much. With the aid of the community around us, our students’ learning can be more effective.

From this point of view, there is no place for a patronizing attitude that says, “I’m here to help you because I am rich or righteous or racially different from you.” Plainly put, the college needs the community, and especially the so-called “needy” in order to educate its students.

Putting Learning Into Service

Service learning, to be educationally valid, must be more than just “doing good” for others. It is intellectually dishonest to grant academic credit to students for simply spending a certain number of hours in community service. If thinking is not enough, neither is doing. There must be both action and analysis. Reflection by the individual and the larger group is essential. Not all service experiences offered at college will require analysis. But those that are granted academic credit surely ought to.

Years ago, I became convinced that to teach a course on the Sermon on the Mount or one of the Gospels, I must draw my students into service projects. But I was slow to see that I must help my students make the connection between their experience in service and the claims of the text.⁸

The lesson is not popular with all college students interested in service. A generation suspicious of both academics and institutions may want to just put in their time at a soup kitchen. But we must insist that the concrete ex-



Students from Walla Walla College (College Place, Washington) serve lunch to the homeless at the local Christian Aid Center on Service Day '95.

communities of cooperation and assistance than we are to go to war. We are bound together by a system of governance that works only when we cooperate and dare to trust one another. This is as true of the college or university as of the larger society.

Third, to be a Christian means to believe that we are intrinsically related to all of God’s creation and bound to-

gether with other human beings by our common needs, hopes, and struggles. We humans have the power to connect, to network, to organize ourselves, and to work together to achieve common goals. Service-based learning provides one vital setting in which we discover these truths.

Years ago, Ellen White proposed a study of history that went beyond a

periences be balanced by analysis, reflection, and wider reading. It is not enough to have a warm feeling about those who show up at the soup kitchen. We need to understand what brings people there, and we also ought to ask what can be done about making the soup kitchen obsolete.

Dealing With Our Resistance

Those monitoring the progress of service-based learning find that their biggest impediment is the academic faculty. Every other entity in higher education warms up faster than they do. Yet no other group is as crucial to the service experience as the faculty—the ones who control the curriculum. College teachers are necessarily cautious about fads. They tend to be reflective and analytical, but there are times for the turtle to stick his neck out and move his shell forward!

We Adventists have brought our own brands of resistance to an emphasis on serving the wider community. Skeptical about the prospects of this world getting any better, we look for the Second Coming. Some in our ranks wonder what this attention to service has to do with the three angels' messages. Is the "social gospel" making inroads in the church?

Wholism is a key component of Adventist beliefs—we do not believe disembodied souls will be spirited away at the Second Coming. Nor does the Bible point to an eternal life away from this world (Revelation 21, 22). No one is likely to take seriously mere talk about a community of love in the presence of God at some later time—be it sooner or later—unless they see evidence of that community's love right now. Adventists in higher education have shed most of the negative parochial aspects of their heritage. But at the same time, we have tended to be embarrassed by the dysfunctional behavior of our apocalyptic family. Like other minority groups within American education, we live in two worlds. The space between religious roots and intellectual associations sometimes becomes a chasm.

To intellectuals who may wonder if their Adventist roots are a liability, I

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point out that the persons who most profoundly influenced the conscience of the world in the past 50 years were rooted within religious and even sectarian minorities—Martin Luther King, Jr., an African-American Baptist preacher from the deep South; Mother Teresa, an Albanian Catholic; Alexander Solzynitzyn, an exiled Russian Orthodox writer; and Elie Wiesel from a European Jewish ghetto. Who would have predicted the moral power of the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi? All of these were able to transcend the narrow fundamentalism of

their communities of faith while finding within those same religious and sectarian communities a well of moral and spiritual resources. This occurred even though they did not know in advance just how their community of faith would support them in their service to the world.⁹

We must not serve others or cooperate with them while trying to distance ourselves from them or to carve out a niche of denominational distinctiveness, but in order to be faithful to our own lights. Our sense of what is necessary and right turns out to often be shared by other thoughtful Christians and non-Christians. This should not surprise us, given the fact that this is a universe through which the Spirit of one God is at work.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Our mission statements promise students a Christian education that will prepare them for a life of service. Do we need to change the mission statements? Or do we need to change the way we teach our courses and construct our academic programs?

Several Adventist institutions of higher education with which I am familiar are individually trying to narrow



Each year, students from Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) paint a number of homes as one of their contributions to the community.



Oakwood College (Huntsville, Alabama) students clean up five miles of local highways as part of their Community Outreach Program.



Dr. Loren Dickinson, a Walla Walla College professor of communication, joins WWC students hoeing in front of a nearby elementary school as part of the college's community service program.

the gap between mission statements and curriculum. For instance, La Sierra University has instituted community service as a requirement for graduation. The President's Commission on Service Learning at Walla Walla College was recently set up to foster service learning within the academic program. A wider

discussion among Adventist colleges and universities would enrich and inform the impulse for service spreading across our campuses. We need to ask how the student-missionary program and other volunteer efforts can be integrated more thoroughly into the curriculum of Adventist colleges.

Now is the time for academic administrators at Adventist institutions to put service learning on the agenda at their regional meetings. We could profit from a summit conference on service. ☸

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For instance, the opening and closing lines of the elaborated mission statement published in the current academic bulletin at Walla Walla College reads, "Through fellowship as well as instruction the faculty seek to develop in students the capacity to . . . live for the service of God and the betterment of mankind."

2. According to the Commission on National and Community Service, service learning is "a method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and the community."

3. Campus Compact: The Project for Public and Community Service is a coalition of several hundred college and university presidents committed to helping students develop the values and skills of civic participation through involvement in public service. In addition to the national organization, a number of state-level Campus Compact organizations exist. For further information, write to Campus Compact, c/o Brown University, Box 1975, Providence, RI 02912. Phone: (401) 863-1119; Fax: (401) 863-3779.

4. The Partnership for Service-Learning is a not-for-profit organization chartered by the State of New York. For further information, write to The Partnership for Service-Learning, 815 Second Avenue, Suite 315, New York, NY 10017. Phone: (212) 986-0989; Fax: (212) 986-5039.

5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 17.

6. I do not wish to downplay the complexities and intransigence of the world's social problems or the risks caregivers face in dealing with them. On the dangers of a success-based approach to service, see Robert Coles, *The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) and David Hilfiker, *Not All of Us Are Saints: A Doctor's Journey with the Poor* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

7. *Education*, p. 238.

8. Ernest J. Bursey, "Action in Higher Education: A Case Study From the Gospels," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 55:2 (December 1992/January 1993), pp. 28-32.

9. I am indebted to Robert Inchausti, *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991) for this insight.