

The Power of Service in Adventist Higher Education



Columbia Union College's campus is located in the quiet suburbs just outside of the nation's capital.

How will our vision for Christian education enable students to take seriously the call of Jesus to be His hands and feet in a world in which wealth and poverty co-exist, where images of hunger and death are seen so often that their impact is minimized?

By Randal Wisbey

While the college of which I am president, Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland, has long been known for its commitment to service, this is, in reality, a common thread in Adventist higher education. As members of academic communities that prize the integration of faith and learning, Adventist educators recognize that a significant part of our work is to introduce students to the joy of serving their fellow human beings—of being involved as active participants with God to bring healing and justice to His broken world.

Ellen White, in the first paragraph of her remarkable book *Education*, reminds us that true education “prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”¹

As we consider the task of Adventist higher education in the 21st century, we must keep this challenge in mind: How will our vision for Christian education enable students to take seriously the call of Jesus to be His hands and feet in a world in which wealth and poverty co-exist, where images of hunger and death are seen so often that their impact is minimized? How can Adventist higher education capture the imagination of our students through a biblical understanding of what it means to be thoughtful and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

Tony Compolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, suggests the following answers for these kinds of questions:

College students are not attracted so much by a religious experience that tries to entertain them as they are to one that challenges them to do things for others. If our colleges provide concrete ways for young adults to minister to the needs of others and to effect social change in the world, they would find their education very attractive. Young adults just may be looking for a college experience that appeals to their latent idealism by calling them to be agents of God's revolution and to be part of His movement to bring healing and justice to His broken world.²

As a college chaplain and teacher, then as a seminary professor, and now as a college administrator, I have had the privilege of seeing students experience the joy of service. I have seen them transformed

from casual observers to active participants who moved beyond the walls of the classroom into the lives of people who very much needed them. I have watched students take seriously the words of Jesus as He declared in that Nazareth synagogue so long ago:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. . . . Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”³

On Adventist campuses across North America, these words continue to be fulfilled. Though this takes place in a multitude of unique ways, the outcomes of such actions are often similar.



Nursing majors at Columbia Union College (CUC) serve by helping to keep patients healthy and by spending time with them, as well.

Allow me to share three results that we are privileged to see as Adventist educators:

Experiencing Community

First, *service provides unique opportunities for students and teachers to experience community.* Many students from our campuses participate in short-term mission experiences during Christmas vacation or spring break. It is always amazing to see the variety of students who sign up for these experiences. No one would expect to see them associating together on campus—they represent the full gamut of the student body. But after 10 days of working, eating, sleeping, and worshiping together, they have developed incredible bonds of community and return to campus as friends. They also return ready to serve.

Seeing the World Through God’s Eyes

Second, *service enables volunteers to see the world through God’s eyes.* Living near our nation’s capital, it is often easy for us as academics to notice mostly the imposing buildings and monuments, the museums and the cultural events. We tend not to visit the crime-ridden sections of the city nor to notice homeless people sleeping on sidewalks. But I don’t believe that’s the way God sees it, nor is it the way He wants our academic community to see it.

When you are engaged in serving those who are hungry,



Student leaders initiate CUC’s ministry and service projects here in H. M. S. Richards Hall.



Education majors at CUC often teach at area schools and mentor students after classes.

when you step into a classroom where you are the only one who understands English and must communicate with refugees from many lands, when you hold a baby who is dying from AIDS, it is nearly impossible to keep your blinders on. And when that takes place as part of a classroom experience, education moves from the acquisition of knowledge to the embrace of learning. When we give our students the opportunity to serve, we expose them to the incredible needs of the world. We thus help them to see the world as God sees it—full of fear and hunger, pressing need, and incomprehensible joy. They learn that the world’s problems are not only the concern of others; everyone is linked together.

Creating People of Vision

Finally, *the embrace of service in higher education creates people of vision.* Service offers incredible opportunities for our students to be challenged and to grow. I am always encouraged as I read the evaluations our students fill out following a service experience. One person, after completing a school-building project, wrote: “For the very first time, I sense that my church really needs me—that God really needs me. It’s broadened my idea of my role as a Christian; maybe I can’t preach, but I can make a difference.”



Since 1904, Columbia Union College has been Washington's Gateway to Service, preparing students to go out and change their worlds.

Another student, when asked what the experience had meant to her spiritually, wrote: "Everything! I am a different person. I saw Jesus' love in action. My priorities are finally getting straightened out." This student was affected in such a positive way that she became active with the leadership team for Loaves and Fishes, the mobile soup kitchen operated by our students.

As educators concerned about the integrity of the educational experiences we offer at our colleges and universities, we must remember that our students process truth relationally rather than propositionally. As members of the postmodern generation, they do not respond well to intellectual apologetics. For this reason, we often hear, "Let me see it with your life before you tell it to me with your words."

Dieter Zander, in the book *Inside the Soul of a New Generation*, reminds us that young adults are looking for religious experiences that are real, rousing, relevant, and relational.⁴ One of the best ways to introduce them to this quality of experience is by joining them, outside the classroom, in the many service opportunities that are available. As we do this, we can model servanthood as a redemptive counterpoint to the tendency of the church toward institutionalism and triumphalism.⁵

Finally, as Adventist educators, it is imperative that we take the Apostle Paul's words to heart:

"As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to

share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us."⁶

Young adults are no longer willing to be told that taking up the offering and giving the Scripture reading is the only way they can be involved in the life of the church. They are tired of sitting and listening. They want to be involved. They want to see if the gospel really makes a difference in the lives of people. And they want to be a part of the process of making a difference in their world.

A number of years ago, while I served as CUC's chaplain, we built a house for an elderly woman during one of our short-term mission trips to Honduras. The students spent the week with her. They slept with her pigs (as did the woman and her family), hunted iguana, and bathed in the nearby creek. The following year, she was at the airport to welcome the students back! Though we did not work at her house that year, she brought homemade tortillas to the students as they worked in the hot sun. To express her gratitude for what CUC's students had done the year before, she invited all 80 of us to her home for a marvelous Honduran meal, which she had prepared over her cooking fire.

By the end of the evening, we were standing in a huge circle, arms linked, singing a song the students had taught her the year before and which she now proclaimed to be her favorite: "We Are One in the Spirit."

We all experienced an incredible realization of what God's grace was all about as we sang by the light of the stars and the fire "We will work with each other, we will work side by side." Even now, as I remember these faces, young and old, students and teachers, I am reminded of all that is best about Adventist education.

We must continue our commitment to the task of integrating faith and learning, as we introduce our students to the world with all its joys and struggles. And as we do so, in the good company of careful scholarship and thoughtful reflection, we must embrace service as the furnace of transformation. As we do so, we will share God's pleasure in seeing young adults fully captivated by the joy of service in this world and looking forward to the promise of an even higher joy and wider service in the world to come. ✍



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REFERENCES

1. Ellen White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 13.
2. Adapted from Anthony Campolo, *Ideas for Social Action* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Youth Specialties, 1983), p. 9.
3. Luke 4:18, 19, 21b, NIV.
4. Tim Celek, Dieter Zander, and Patrick Kampert, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), p. 132.
5. Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 132.
6. 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8, NIV.