

The Spiritual Mission of Seventh-day Adventist Education in the 21st Century



Lynn Wood Hall, the oldest building on the Southern Adventist University (SAU) campus, is home to the advancement, development, alumni relations, and campus safety offices, as well as SAU's history museum.

was given 10 minutes to talk about the spiritual mission of Seventh-day Adventist education in the 21st century. I can do it in 10 seconds!

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”¹—end of story! That is the sum total of why we have denominationally sponsored higher education. God became flesh for us so we could know Him—and we embody that message to future generations in faith-based learning environments where we put flesh on abstract doctrines. We create environments where the Word becomes flesh every day, in every class, in every contact with every student, and through every employee.

Steven Garber has studied the mature Christian college graduate who, over the years, has integrated belief with behavior. He suggests three traits that these adult Christians have in common²:

1. Convictions—a worldview sufficient for life's questions and crises

For 600 years after the founding of the first colleges and universities in the Western world, all institutions of higher education were operated by churches. All education was religiously based. Its purpose was to build a coherent, faith-based worldview—a worldview that answered life's basic questions: “Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?”

But today, humanity's innate drive for meaning in life is more often approached with scorn in politically correct universities. Vaclav Havel said: “The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.”³ The response when confronted with meaningful questions about life is too often a thoughtless “Whatever works for you” because postmodernism suggests that there is no absolute truth.

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By Gordon Bietz

A study of college-age students' favorite phrases indicated that a single word was close to the top in popularity—"Whatever!" Adventist education posits an opinion about life, truth, and the source of truth—we share convictions. Our response to the questions of life is not —Whatever!—The mission of Adventist education must be to instill a culture of conviction.

If the Word is to become flesh on Seventh-day Adventist campuses, they can't be a value-neutral zone where spiritual discussions are thought to be academically inappropriate or where spiritual issues are treated with an air of neutrality and detachment. Christian convictions about life must be integral to the learning environment.

Walker Percy warned in his book *The Second Coming* that it is possible to "get all A's and flunk life."⁴ The most educated country of its time gave birth to Hitler and Nazism. Robert Coles said in *The Moral Life of Children*: "A well-developed conscience does not translate, necessarily, into a morally courageous life."⁵ It is Adventist education's mission to develop morally courageous young people who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.

2. Character—mentors who incarnate that worldview

In the *Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis suggested that the danger of paying diminishing attention to values in education is that it would produce "men without chests"⁶ or students whose response to the great moral issues of the day is not a principled one.

Character is developed through relationships. The Word becomes flesh when a pubescent student connects with a mentor who lives the reality of a Christian life. As teachers and peers interface with students, they can provide a real-life model for Christian living.

This needs to happen both outside and inside the classroom. Too often, student formation is left to the Internet and the local movie theater, where our young people learn theology from *Lord of the Rings* and history from Oliver Stone.

Seventh-day Adventist higher education must not become professional trade schools where the only goal is to provide students with a marketable skill so they can become a cog in society's information machine. Information detached from meaning is as dangerous as having cars detached from drivers. Facts acquire meaning as the student sees the integration of faith in the life of an integrated person.

3. Community—living out a Christian worldview in company with mutually committed and stimulating people

The idea of *in loco parentis* has been abandoned by most universities today. In Alexander Astin's book *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited*, he says: "The student's peer group is the single most potent



Adventist education must combine the transmission of information with mentoring and moral training.



SAU's students engage in collaborative learning as part of their education.



The mission of Adventist education must be to install a culture of conviction.



SAU's close-knit student body and residential campus setting create a unique campus atmosphere.



It is Adventist education's mission to develop morally courageous young people who will stand for the right through the heavens fall.



Located at the center of campus, Wright Hall, Southern Adventist University's Administration Building, houses administrative support offices, as well as the cafeteria and student center.



Quality education requires interactions that grow out of conversations with mentors and peers as significant issues of life are addressed.

source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years.⁷⁷ And so it is the mission of Adventist education to build a faithful community of learners through its scholarships, programs, and campus lifestyle guidelines that support the goals of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The biggest problem in the world today isn't building fuel-efficient cars or even saving the ecology of the planet. Our biggest problem is how to get along with each other—Palestinian and Jew; Protestant and Catholic, Muslim and Christian, black and white. Our education should model the life of Jesus. We should create utopian communities where the grace and love of God is seen in faculty, staff, and student relationships.

If education were simply the transmission of information, we could take our star teachers and beam their classes to everyone, but you can't sing in a choir on the Internet, you can't play in an orchestra through fiber optic connections, and you can't play intermural sports on the computer screen—no matter how fast you move your mouse. The reality is that quality education grows from conversations with mentors and peers as significant issues of life are addressed. Therefore, it is the mission of Seventh-day Adventist education to develop communities that are safe for those significant conversations.

Richard Neuhaus has said: "It is by identifying with some Christian community and making its story and values one's own that character is naturally formed. Its moral heritage, proverbial wisdom, and moral exemplars create levels of expectation and a sense of accountability."⁷⁸



The spiritual mission of Seventh-day Adventist education in the 21st century, then, is to:

1. Deepen spiritual conviction;
2. Build character; and
3. Create a community of faith where the Word becomes flesh.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John 1:14.
2. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Quoted in *The Christian Academy*, p. 112.
3. Vaclav Havel, in a letter found by Robert Royal; quoted by Martin Marty in "Context," *Christianity Today* 34:13 (June 1, 1990).
4. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980).
5. Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
7. Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), p. 398.
8. Richard Neuhaus, "The Christian University: Eleven Theses," *First Things* (January 1996), pp. 20-22.