

# Physical SYMBOLS in Adventist Schools

## A PRELIMINARY STUDY



**T**his is the firsthand story of two former principals from different faith traditions who became friends because of their common interest in Christian education. We first met some 15 years ago at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. At the time, we were both professors of educational administration: Lyndon G. Furst (Jerry) at Andrews University, and Stephen J. Denig (Steve) at Niagara University. Our paths crossed at several meetings related to private schools and also a special-interest group related to religion and education. Over the years, we developed both a personal and professional friendship and decided, about 10 years ago, to conduct some research together comparing ways that Adventist and Catholic schools transmit their religious culture to the young people

under their care. Our research focused on a small part of that broad topic—the use of physical symbols to transmit religious heritage and values.

This article is a report on what we found as a result of our joint research project. We present this in story form rather than in the traditional format of a research report since it has already been published in that format.<sup>1</sup> Readers who are interested in the technical details can read the original research report. Also, we must add that the conclusions of this study would apply primarily to North America and may translate imperfectly across cultures.

It is not our intention to suggest that Adventist schools should be more like Catholic schools, although both types of schools have a similar purpose: to transmit their religious heritage to the younger generation. We do believe, however, that each tradition can learn from the other. While Adventist schools should not try to be like Catholic

schools, they might discover some methods of becoming more effective at grounding their young people in the Adventist faith.

**Jerry:** Some years ago, I was principal of an Adventist boarding school located on the outskirts of a small Midwestern town. One day, some people driving by on the highway stopped at the school to get directions. As I chatted with them, they asked what kind of institution was housed in these buildings. When I told them it was a religious school, they were very surprised because they could not see any of the trappings normally found in such schools.

After they left, I thought about the experience. As I looked around the lobby of the administration building, I had to admit that nothing marked it as a distinctly Adventist school. When my friend Steve heard this story, he expressed great surprise because Catholic

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schools are filled with much symbolism that identifies the religious heritage of the school.

It might be surprising to some that Adventist tradition is quite devoid of symbolism since our doctrine of the sanctuary, which is rich in symbols, is one of the church's distinctive beliefs. Thus, it may be that it is more of a tradition than a theological belief that Adventists have shunned physical symbols in church-owned structures.

The first Adventist church, in Washington, New Hampshire, was described as a plain wooden structure.<sup>2</sup> This seemed to set the standard for church buildings for many years. Some years later, Ellen White counseled, "God would not have His people expend means extravagantly for show or ornament." Rather, she suggested, they should "observe neatness, order, taste, and plain beauty"<sup>3</sup> as they built their structures.

**Steve:** I do not know a great deal about the Adventist tradition, but I do understand the Catholic tradition. I had

20 years of education in Catholic institutions and have grown very comfortable and familiar with the use of symbols. In my tradition, symbols are sacramentals. Sacramentals are not sacraments, but rather physical objects that people use both to come to a deeper understanding of their faith and to remind them throughout the day of that faith. For example, I often carry a rosary in my pocket. When I reach for my spare change, I also feel the rosary, which reminds me to pray more often than I do.

**Jerry:** Since both of us are interested in the administration of schools, we decided to survey principals of both Catholic and Adventist schools regarding the use of physical symbols to transmit each denomination's religious beliefs. As a working definition, we used the following: *Something that represents something else; a material object used to represent something invisible.*

We developed a questionnaire pro-

tolocol so that we could ask similar questions of the principals of the two types of schools. I conducted telephone interviews with principals in 20 Adventist schools, 10 elementary and 10 secondary, all in the United States. While I did not conduct a random sample, I did get a cross-section of schools throughout the country—large and small elementary schools, and boarding and day secondary schools. In every case, the principals were cooperative and happy to talk with me about their schools.

For analytical purposes, we did not use the standard interpretive techniques that are typical of qualitative research. Rather, we provided a documentary listing of what respondents told us and reported the results in summary format.

It was not our intention to have the final word on the subject but to stimulate discussion and further research.

**Steve:** I had the same experience when I spoke with 10 elementary and 10 secondary principals from Catholic schools in the United States. Although none of the schools were boarding schools, I deliberately chose a representative sample of Catholic schools throughout the country. The principals all were willing to give me a few minutes to talk about their schools. Most of the time, the few minutes turned into a conversation that lasted about 45 minutes.

**Jerry:** In my telephone interviews, I first identified myself as a professor at Andrews University and explained the kind of research that I was doing. I also mentioned that my friend Steve was studying Catholic schools and asking the same questions. Each interview took about 20 minutes, although some went much longer. I asked what types of religious symbols were visible in their school, if there were subtle elements of the structure that might have symbolic meaning, and how these symbols might be used to teach Adventist beliefs. I also asked what it was about the physical aspects of the building that marked it as an Adventist school. A further question asked principals what physical symbols they had introduced



Lyndon Furst, co-author of this article, discusses religious symbols with Wendy Baldwin, principal of the Village Adventist Elementary School in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

since they had become principals and what additional symbols they would like to have. Finally, I asked principals to make a general statement regarding their feelings about religious symbols in the school and how they could enhance or interfere with transmitting the Adventist culture to the students.

**Steve:** I asked the same basic questions of the Catholic participants. I surmised that most of them were a bit surprised that someone would call to speak with them about symbols. We just take symbols for granted, like the air we breathe. It is what philosophers might call an existential. What I found interesting is that my first question, like Jerry's, was about the physical symbols found in the school. As I moved to the later questions, they would return to their first answer and add more and more symbols to the discussion. I think that the conversation was a good experience for them because they became more and more conscious of something that they took for granted.

**Jerry:** The response to the telephone survey was generally quite positive. Most of the Adventist principals told me they had never really thought about the use of symbols in their school to teach our Adventist beliefs. In fact, several when first queried said, "We don't have any symbols." However, as I probed, they became aware of what they did have in their school. For the exterior of the school, the most common symbol was a sign that included the word *Christian* or *Adventist*. Inside the school, both in the public areas such as hallways and lobby and in the classrooms, the most common symbol was a picture of Christ. Other symbols mentioned by several principals were signs or posters, and bulletin boards with religious displays.

In addition to asking what symbols were present, I probed to find out the general feeling of the principal toward the use of symbols in his or her school. While most principals generally had a

positive attitude about the subject, a few thought we should be careful not to have too much symbolism. This was more evident in the smaller elementary schools than in the larger ones or in the secondary schools. A majority of the principals had actually added physical symbols to their schools during their tenure as principals. However, it was very evident, when I reviewed the survey of all the schools, that Adventists, at least in the United States, do not give much thought to this subject as part of our overall educational strategy. In other words, there is not much intentionality to the use of symbols in Adventist schools. It seemed to be only an afterthought.

**Steve:** Although the use of symbols in Catholic schools is taken for granted, I would not say that they are an afterthought. They are there very deliberately. We could not imagine a Catholic school without them. Almost every principal said there was a crucifix in every room of the school. In one school, a large crucifix was painted on

the wall of the gymnasium. The crucifix is the most predominant physical symbol in Catholic schools. Every Catholic school principal mentioned a statue or picture of the Blessed Mother, which serves as a reminder of the Incarnation, that God became Man. In most of the classrooms, Bibles were on display, which remind us that we Christians, like Jews and Moslems, are people of the book.

Several principals mentioned that there was symbolic value in the school being next to the church, which reminds people that children are the future of the church. It is taken for granted that Catholic school children wear uniforms, which the principals interpreted differently, some believing that the uniforms symbolized that we are all equal in the eyes of God, while others seeing them as a symbol of the dignity of each child. A prevalence of physical symbols, especially the crucifix, the Blessed Mother, and the saints of the church, makes the school easily identified as a Catholic school to anyone who might be visiting the facility. The richness of the iconography establishes the identity of the school.

**Jerry:** So, what do we make of all this as far as Adventist schools are concerned? The contrast we found between the Adventist and the Catholic schools is quite significant. In the Catholic schools, physical symbols play an important role in transmitting their religious heritage. The symbols are closely tied to the doctrinal beliefs of the church. It is obvious that Catholic school leaders give a great deal of thought to the use of symbols as they design the curriculum and the instructional process.

Adventists, by contrast, use symbols in more of a decorative mode than as a teaching strategy. The principals I talked to had not given much thought to the subject—at least not until I interviewed them. Many saw only a casual connection between our spiritual mission and the use of symbolism in carrying out that mission.

**Steve:** What I heard in my conversations with the Catholic school principals is that some schools used symbols more than others, but all the schools used symbols. My reflection in this is that symbols are not necessarily a Catholic thing, but are a human thing. Human beings are by nature symbolic. When both of us visited two Adventist schools, I noticed that some of the children wore T-shirts with commercial symbols like Pepsi Cola and their favorite music groups. In one classroom, there was a statue of Francis of Assisi surrounded by animals, which I am sure was not just a decoration, but a reminder to children that God gave us

humans dominion over the earth and all animals, and that we have an obligation to care for both.

**Jerry:** I was heartened to find that the predominant symbol in Adventist schools is a picture of Jesus. This is certainly consistent with our Christ-centered approach to education. However, I would suggest that we be much more intentional about the use of symbols in our schools, including them in our lesson plans on a daily basis. Our mission is to bring Adventist young people to a closer relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and we should not be casual about it. In this, we have much to learn



**Statue of Simon carrying Christ's cross at Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama.**



**Quotation in the hallway of the School of Education at La Sierra University, Riverside, California.**



Above: Construction barrier at Loma Linda University and Medical Center, Loma Linda, California.

Right: Walla Walla University seal showing the relationship between the physical, mental, and spiritual in Adventist education.

from Catholic educators who have an intentional approach to the use of their major symbols in carrying out their mission in Catholic schools.

### Conclusion

So here is a call for much more intentionality on the part of our Adventist school leaders and teachers in giving attention to the matter of physical symbols in our schools. They can be a vital part of our educational program. This needs to take place not only at the local school level, but also as educational leaders at all levels of the church structure should study ways we can become more effective in carrying out our vital mission for the church.

**Steve:** I could not agree with you more. There is what we call the hidden or the covert curriculum in schools. That is what children learn in schools above and beyond what we teach. If children go through the school day without any explicit mention of God and the role that God plays in their lives, then implicitly the children learn that they can exist in their lives without God. We do not intend to teach this,

but it happens. By surrounding children with symbols, we can teach them that God is a part of their lives and wants to be a part of their lives. We as adults, who create the structure of schools, should show children that God is meaningful in our lives. We can do this through the symbols that we incorporate in our schools. In both faith communities, symbols also convey to parents, constituents, and the community what the school's values and its religious heritage are all about.

### Some Specific Suggestions

We offer the following suggestions for Adventist educational leaders to consider:

1. Since using symbols to further the instructional goals of Adventist schools is not a part of our recent tradition, we suggest that Adventist educators at the regional and national levels give serious thought as to which symbols might be appropriate in Adventist schools and how they might enhance student, parent, and community understanding of unique Adventist doctrines. Teachers

and lay board members may need guidance in this area. Thus, leaders at either the union or the North American Division level should offer some guidance and advice. Because curriculum is determined at the higher levels of church organization, that is the appropriate place for symbols to be integrated into the curriculum in ways that support and enhance the teaching of our doctrinal beliefs.

2. School principals can survey their facilities to identify what symbols already exist. The results of the survey will help identify the appropriateness of existing symbols and indicate what might be missing that would clearly identify the institution as an Adventist school.

3. School principals can, as a result of the survey recommended above, develop a master plan for the inclusion of appropriate symbols throughout the school campus. Thus, there would be some degree of intentionality in the placement of these symbols rather than merely a decorative approach to their use. It is most important to keep in mind the purpose of symbols—teaching the doctrines of the Bible from a unique Adventist perspective.

A word of warning is appropriate here: Symbols can have multiple meanings. Great care must be taken to ensure that the symbols chosen do not carry a negative meaning that may not be apparent to the adults but is widely known by youth. Certainly, the picture of Jesus or the symbol for the three angels of Revelation 14 are appropriate and have an historical as well as philosophical connection to Adventism. However, some symbols, such as the three angels, are unique to Adventism

symbols as a focal point in their teaching. Both art and Bible classes lend themselves well to the use of symbols in teaching. In the study of science with its multitude of symbols, the creative teacher can find many parallels to the use of symbols to communicate ideas about the “science of salvation.” The same holds true for math classes. Teachers should be intentional when choosing themes for display on bulletin boards.

5. We strongly recommend that Ad-

mind them of the Adventist faith and in suggesting ways that symbols can be integrated into the daily program of the school. ✍

*This article has been peer reviewed.*



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Stained-glass window at Union College Adventist church, Lincoln, Nebraska.

and are not understood by the general population. Other symbols might need more thought before they are displayed in the school. Care must be taken that symbols are not offensive to other cultural or church groups and national or local organizations.

4. As we have mentioned above, intentionality is very important in the placement of symbols throughout the Adventist school campus. Thus, teachers should be encouraged to include within their daily lesson plans religious

ventist schools periodically conduct research to assess children’s understanding of the symbols that are present within the classroom and throughout the campus to determine their effectiveness as teaching tools. It is not enough just to add symbols to the barren walls of the school. They must have some purpose, and administrators must determine whether that purpose is being achieved. This must be an ongoing process.

6. We also might suggest that students in our schools be involved in identifying the symbols that would re-

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The technical version of this story was published in 2005 in the *Journal of Empirical Theology* 181:1, pages 1-21, and is entitled “The Use of Physical Symbols to Transmit Culture in Religious Schools: A Comparison of Adventist and Catholic Schools in America.” To order, contact Periodicals Service Company, 11 Main Street, Germantown, NY 12526, U.S.A. e-mail: psc@periodicals.com. Website: <http://www.periodicals.com/brill.html>.

2. M. Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1925).

3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 2, p. 257.