



DISCIPLESHIP

The Reinventing of Adventist Higher Education

I had just finished teaching a class when one of the students tapped my arm and asked to see me. Upon entering my office, he sat down without a word. Normally an effervescent contributor from the back row, his usual smile was replaced with an agitated nervousness. “Professor,” he began, “I’m addicted to sex. My girlfriend and I sometimes have it five or six times a day. And now. . .” his voice trailed off, “she’s pregnant.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “She left for Europe this morning to attend classes abroad. I want her to get an abortion, but she wants to keep the baby. I’m too young to be a father, and I’m not sure I can survive without sex while she is

gone. What should I do?”

That counseling situation helped me define questions I had about my teaching role:

- *What is my purpose in the classroom?* I saw myself as an expert sharing content, while this student needed a mentor who could help shape his character.

- *How can I have an impact not only on my students’ knowledge, but also regarding their life choices?* The answer, I believe, lies in a reinventing of Adventist higher education according to the discipleship model of Jesus.

A close look at Jesus’ model of ministry indicates that He not only transmitted truth but also molded and shaped character. Jesus’ method for helping His followers incorporate His

kingdom principles into their lives used a process of discipleship that profoundly transformed them.

The Purpose of Adventist Higher Education

Comparing Christ’s model of education with my own teaching led me to ask whether I had missed the point. Was I dependent on content delivery and lectures rather than character change? In contrast, Jesus’ ministry emphasized *transformation* more than *information*.

Ellen White’s vision of education also helped steer me in the direction of discipleship. She helped me identify that the purpose of education is to re-

BY ALAN PARKER

store the image of God in humanity.¹ This involves not only the salvation of the student, but also his or her development in all spheres of life. Thus, Christian education is holistic, practical, and eternal in its perspective. According to Ellen White, true education is not simply the acquisition of facts about the sciences and the humanities, but a “knowledge of God.”² Throughout her writings, she showed that education is not about becoming more intelligent or skillful; it is becoming like Christ.³

In a similar vein, Howard Hendricks, who for more than 50 years taught religion and encouraged discipleship at Dallas Theological Seminary, states, “Secular education seeks to make better, more effective, more successful, more intelligent people. The Christian educator aspires to nothing less than the transformation of a believer into the image of Christ.”⁴

Hendricks notes additional contrasts between secular education and Christian education. Secular education is concerned with business and money, molecules and matter, people and issues. Christian education is concerned with things that last, such as character and the kingdom of God. Secular education helps a person fit into the world; Christian education helps lift a person above the world.

But how is character transformation achieved? Pointing to the ministry of Christ, Ellen White declared that, “there is no education to be gained higher than that given to the early disciples, and which is revealed to us through the word of God.”⁵ She stated that “higher education” is about character development, and it can be accomplished only through discipleship.⁶ Hendricks comes to the same powerful conclusion as Ellen White. “Christian educators should view themselves as nothing less than disciples.”⁷

Likewise, Arthur Holmes, in his classic work on Christian education,⁸ challenges the notion that the Christian

college is simply a “defender of the faith.” Christian higher education does not exist to “offer a good education plus biblical studies in an atmosphere of piety.” Neither is its purpose just to “train people for church-related vocations.” He shows that neither of these reasons justifies the expense and time required to offer a distinctive Christian education.⁹

According to Holmes, a Christian liberal-arts education must go beyond the transmission of content or even values to deal with the “making of a person.”¹⁰ It is about imaging God in every phase of our human existence.¹¹ Offering a Christian liberal-arts education means “teaching students to be responsible agents in all of life’s relationships, which presupposes our development as reflective and valuing beings.”¹²

More recently, a growing chorus of voices has been declaring that the purpose of education should be the shaping of character.¹³ David Shields points out that “we have too often equated excellence with the quantity of content

learned, rather than with the quality of *character* the person develops.” He adds that “the goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways.”¹⁴

Weaknesses of Contemporary Christian Education

How is this view of person-based education different from what currently happens in most classrooms? Unfortunately, teaching students to make wise choices and helping to shape their character is often considered incidental to the real task of teaching the subject matter of the course. In many courses, the maturity of students is assumed rather than actively directed and promoted.

In higher education, interaction between students and faculty is generally limited to the classroom, especially with large General Education (GE) classes. Since lifestyle and work issues occur outside of the classroom, students quickly learn that they must de-



SALT students work on a scenario with their mentor, Alan Parker, the author of this article, before doing outreach in the community.

velop their own coping mechanisms, and the ones they acquire may be completely unrelated to the class content. Without mentoring, youthful decisions lead to lifetime habits that may endanger young people's future success—both temporal and eternal. Especially in their first two years of college, students are often on their own, drifting between departments trying to choose a major, while at the same time making poor choices with no guidance.

Many students also fail to find a meaningful spiritual or learning community when they enter the university environment, even on an Adventist campus. Since students largely interact with strangers in their GE classes, and at large campus churches, they have little sense of connection to their teachers, pastors, and other adult church members. As a result, many of their lifestyle decisions are influenced by their peer group, which may lack the maturity to make reasoned decisions about faith and at-risk behaviors.¹⁵

On Adventist campuses, students also experience dormitory living; however, this more often than not leads to programmed faith, late nights, escapism, and superficial spirituality. Students may make adjustments to the institution's behavioral expectations, but underlying issues such as sexuality and faith development are often not addressed.

The need for character development is especially critical because during their university years, students go through an incredibly transformative period: They often decide on their career and calling, develop their belief systems, make faith commitments, engage in dating and even marry, and ultimately establish their worldviews. The need for community, dialogue, mentoring, and a sense of mission and values is more critical now than perhaps at any other time in their lives. Yet, much of this formative development takes place *outside the classroom* rather than in it.



Lisa-Marie Heldzinger and Amir Davis practice their survey skills at the door of a Tennessee resident.

The net effect of contemporary Christian education is that students gain knowledge and skills (probably in that order) and some awareness of Christian values, but often at the expense of holistic living and the development of true Christian character.

It is within this context that we as Adventist educators need to re-evaluate our pedagogical methodology and recapture Ellen White's original vision. We need to bring back an integrated, coherent approach to the task of educating the *person* rather than equipping the *product*. I believe that Jesus' method of discipleship provides the basis for developing a process that will enable us to be more effective in achieving the grand purposes of Adventist higher education.

Jesus' Method of Discipleship Education

What is a discipleship model, and how can it be applied to the Adventist educational system? Obviously, differences exist between Jesus' itinerant ministry in the first century and a tu-

ition-based university education in the 21st century. In today's world, teachers cannot live with their students in other people's homes while wandering the fields teaching parables and depending on handouts. Yet, trends in contemporary education suggest that there are powerful ways in which we can apply Jesus' discipleship model today.

The most obvious element of Jesus' discipleship model was the sense of community that He fostered among His followers. He selected a few "students" and spent most of His time with them rather than mainly teaching large crowds. Robert E. Coleman argues that Jesus' primary concern was with His disciples: "His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes but with men whom the multitudes would follow. . . . The initial objective of Jesus' plan was to enlist men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his work after he returned to the Father."¹⁶

Coleman explains Jesus' method further: "One cannot transform the

world except as individuals in the world are transformed, and individuals cannot be changed except as they are molded in the hands of the Master. The necessity is apparent not only to select a few helpers, but also to keep the group small enough to be able to work effectively with them.¹⁷

The idea of working consistently with a small group over an extended period of time is known in educational circles as the *cohort model*. Simply stated, this means assigning students to take courses together in order to build bonds of peer support. It has been used with remarkable success at the graduate level, where social factors such as loneliness, isolation, and stress negatively affected students' ability to complete their programs.¹⁸ However, even at the undergraduate level, the use of peer support groups has proved effective. Deborah Bial used "posses" to help prepare students with low SAT scores to gain admission to the elite colleges

they wished to attend. Because a full cohort experience was impractical in this situation, the posse group involved 10 students meeting with a faculty member once a week on an ongoing basis. As a result, 90 percent of the Posse Students graduated, half of them made the dean's list, and a quarter of them earned academic honors.¹⁹

Adventist universities are also experimenting with this kind of discipleship model. At Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, I am one of the teachers for a First Year Experience class called Southern Connections. Similar to the posse model, it requires students from a common discipline to meet once a week to discuss how to succeed in college life.

I have also begun a new program called SALT (Soul-winning and Leadership Training), which provides a unique cohort experience for incoming freshmen for their first semester. Because class sizes are limited, students are able to take all their courses to-

gether and to engage in shared spiritual and outreach experiences. Not only does this produce more effective student bonding, but participants also become more willing to share what is happening in their lives outside of the classroom. I have discovered that opportunities for mentoring and character development are greatly enhanced by this kind of cohort system.

However, I have also learned that establishing community means spending time with students outside of the classroom. It means helping them understand relationships and giving them advice on how relationships work. It means "hanging out" in addition to lecturing. It means having students write journals and share their hearts with teachers. It means becoming involved in their lives.

Missional Service

Jesus not only brought His disciples into community, He also engaged them in active service on behalf of the King-



The first set of cohort students in the SALT Program at Southern Adventist University. The group took all of their classes together.

dom. He helped them to understand God's plan for them and for society. In the same way, unless we have a clear mission for our teaching, and unless we train our students to think with a missional mindset, we will have failed in our task. Students must see the needs of the world and be inspired to share their resources and time. They will likely do this only when they see these attitudes modeled in the lives of the adults around them. When they see their teachers and pastors passionate about the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden, and the lost, it will ignite a passion within them. They need to see that we, as Adventist educators, believe in God's mission in the world.

In contemporary education, we often seek to achieve this goal through engaging students in service and service learning, which are gaining in popularity. Volunteerism means engaging students in community projects that enhance their academic learning and benefit the community.²⁰ Many Adventist institutions are implementing a variety of service projects, with good success. However, to implement service learning, teachers need to design appropriate academic projects that connect with the student's discipline.

Service learning is an effective learning tool—studies show that it has a positive effect on students' grades, writing skills, critical thinking skills, and understanding of course content.²¹ I incorporate service-learning components in most of my classes because I believe this makes the educational experience not only more transformative, but also more Christlike. I engage in community activities, invite students to join me, and then we reflect on these experiences together.

I have repeatedly seen the transforming effects of service learning. Students come to see themselves as partners in God's mission. Every summer, I lead 10 theology students in a field



Student preachers and their mentoring pastors at the Southern Union Conference Field School in Meridian, Mississippi.

school of evangelism where they work in local churches and are mentored in preaching their own evangelistic meetings. Since I also preach my own series, we share a common bond as we experience the highs and the lows of the evangelistic experience together. This enhances our relationships and makes our conversations about ministry much more genuine and nuanced.

Experiential Learning

How Jesus involved His disciples in ministry and service also has application to how we do Christian education today. First, we see Jesus calling His disciples into service (Matthew 4:19). Then we see Him preaching and healing so they could see what ministry looked like in practical terms (Matthew 4:23). Once He had their attention, Jesus directed His disciples' minds to the principles of His kingdom (Matthew 5-7). He then lived out those principles in ministry (Matthew 8 and 9). Once the disciples grasped these principles, He sent them out with explicit instructions on how to engage in ministry themselves (Matthew 10). He then followed the disciples and preached in the towns that they had

just visited (Matthew 11:1).

Today, we refer to this as *experiential learning*, or what Stephen Kemp calls "situated learning."²² David Kolb popularized this concept, which emphasizes "the central role that experience plays in the learning process."²³ To illustrate: if you want to teach people to swim, you don't do so by simply assigning them to read about the theory of swimming. They need to jump in the water and practice! In the same way, trying to teach students the Christian life using only classroom discussions and reading assignments is obviously inadequate. Christian teachers can learn from Jesus' method of discipleship and have students engage in actual life experiences, and then help them to meaningfully reflect on what they have learned.

Kolb suggests that we move from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization to active experimentation, and then repeat the cycle. We can thus move our students from experience to knowledge back to experience.

We can see this learning cycle constantly at work in Jesus' ministry. In

Matthew 16, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?”²⁴ While Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah, he clearly does not understand what this concept means. When Jesus responds by telling him about His portending suffering and death, Peter vehemently denies this view and is emphatically corrected by Jesus. This same cycle—confession, explanation, denial, and correction—is repeated several times. It is only when the experience of the Cross and the Resurrection shatters Peter’s version of reality that he comes to understand the true meaning of Jesus’ role as the Messiah.

But how would this model work in an educational setting? Many programs now include practical experience as part of the undergraduate program. For theology students, Southern Adventist University requires two years of “externship” in a local church. Not only do students gain hands-on ministry involvement, but they also meet with a pastor for eight sessions every semester to reflect on the practical realities of ministry.

The impact of this approach on my Church Ministry class has been invaluable. Rather than listening to academic discussions about how ministry works, they can relate to real-life examples and reflect on church boards they have attended, visitation in which they have participated, and political and social challenges their pastor mentors are facing. We also teach participating pastors how to use Kolb’s theory of learning to enable them to successfully mentor students and engage them in dialogue.

Experiential learning offers a wonderful way to engage students in reflecting on their practical experiences and moving toward a discipleship model of education. However, experiential learning alone is inadequate and incomplete.

Intentional Character Development

The Gospels repeatedly portray Jesus engaging in the intentional development of character. As a result of His disciple-

ship methods, the disciples moved from unbelief to belief, from brashness to humility, from anger to love, from prejudice to hospitality, from fear of the religious leaders to holy boldness, from position-seeking to readiness for persecution. Jesus seized teachable moments and turned them into lessons of transformation (as happened in the story of Peter and the temple tax).

However, we cannot expect character development to happen automatically in our schools. It requires intentionality on the part of everyone who participates in the education of students. We can start by looking at the emotional, ethical, and spiritual needs of the young people who are entering our universities and colleges. How can we offer age-appropriate strategies to help them embrace a relationship with Christ and grow in their Christian walk? How can we help them understand the kingdom of God and the mission of the church? How can we help the ones who struggle with the spiritual and emotional bankruptcy of their families, their churches, and their past?

According to David Shields, character development includes four components:²⁵

1. *Intellectual Character.* Referencing Ron Ritchhart’s book *Intellectual Character*, Shields describes a person with intellectual character as curious, open-minded, reflective, strategic, skeptical, and truth-seeking. If we are intentional about developing intellectual character, we will be far more concerned with *how* students are learning than *what* they are learning.

2. *Moral Character.* Shields defines this as the disposition to do good and right. In my classes, I have seen students give the right answer to a question on why Christians should avoid alcohol but go out and have a big drinking party that weekend. We need to find ways to achieve integration between our students’ cognitive under-

standing and their behavior.

3. *Civic Character,* the passion for the common good. We need to not only teach social issues, but also encourage students to engage in them. As an example, some students on our campus helped raise \$25,000 for a girls’ school in Uganda, went to Congress to lobby for war recovery, and travelled to the school in Uganda to help mentor students and their families. We need to develop both a local and global civic consciousness.

4. *Performance Character,* the ability of a person to accomplish intentions and goals. This is the characteristic that makes the other character elements effective. One way that I have found to be successful in developing performance character is to show students not only how I get tasks done, but also describe my failures and successes with spiritual growth. In our attempt to be intentional about character development, my colleagues and I have found it helpful to have students develop a personal growth plan.

In our Christian Spirituality classes, we have students take a personal spiritual assessment at <http://assessyourself.org>, which examines character, worldview, love for God, and obstacles to growth. In response, students develop a set of personalized goals and activities, and give monthly updates to a faculty member who mentors them in their growth process.

Teaching from a discipleship perspective requires a different model of education. We must have clear character outcomes in mind as we plan our curriculum. We need to see the student as less of a test taker and more of a person in need of emotional and spiritual wholeness. One strategy that we have followed in our department is to identify specific student character outcomes we would like to see in our graduates. We have the students develop portfolios and meet with them annually to discuss their goals. We also do the 16PF

(Personality Factor) Test²⁶ every two years, and dialogue with students about strengths and weaknesses in their personality types.

Although a programmed approach to character development has significant advantages over random and uncoordinated approaches, by itself, it will not transform students' characters. What is needed is for faculty and senior students to intentionally mentor younger students, all the while maintaining clear goals.²⁷ By embracing Jesus' discipleship style, we can be certain that effective lifestyle and character changes are much more likely to occur.

Conclusion

It is time to reinvent Adventist education. We need to focus on the development of the person rather than the equipping of the product. I believe that discipleship is the best way to do this. Jesus' method of establishing community; reflecting on experience; engaging in missional service; and enhancing social, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional development will transform our task of educating today. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.



Alan Parker, D.Th., is a Professor of Ministry and Evangelism at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, where he also serves as the Director

of the Pierson Institute of Evangelism and Missions, leads the externship program for junior and theology students, and recently launched a new cohort program for incoming freshmen. Dr. Parker previously worked as the vice-president of

evangelism at Amazing Facts in California and was the director of their school of evangelism. This article has been condensed from a presentation at the Biblical Foundations for Faith and Learning Conference in Cancun, Mexico, in February 2011.

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3. Ellen G. White, *Counsels for the Church* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn, 1991), p. 78.
4. Roberta Hestenes, Howard G. Hendricks, and Earl F. Palmer, *Mastering Teaching* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1991), p. 15.
5. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1913), p. 11.
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7. Howard Hendricks, "What Makes Christian Education Distinct?" in Hestenes, et al., *Mastering Teaching*, op cit., p. 17.
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10. Ibid., p. 29.
11. Ibid., p. 28.
12. Ibid., p. 33.
13. See Thomas Lickona's *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam, 1989); Michela Borba, *Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues That Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); and Ron Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
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23. David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p. 20. However, Kolb draws on a thesis first articulated by the Russian cognitive theorist Lev S. Vygotsky, "that learning from experience is the process whereby human development occurs" (cited in Kolb, p. xi). See also Kemp, "Situated Learning," op cit., p. 119.

24. Matthew 16:15, NKJV.

25. See Shields, "Character as the Aim of Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, op cit., pp. 49-52.

26. This multiple-choice personality questionnaire was refined over several decades of research by Raymond B. Cattell and other scholars who did extensive research into personality traits.

27. The good news is that today's millennial population actively seeks mentoring and is more open to it than previous generations. See Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd, "Mentoring Millennials" in *Harvard Business Review* (May 2010): <http://hbr.org/2010/05/mentoring-millennials/ar/1>; and Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Publishing, 2011), pp. 40, 41.