



Theodore N. Levterov

# Sharing Adventism in the Classroom



## Lessons From Teaching Religion at Loma Linda University

Teaching religion at Loma Linda University (Loma Linda, California) is both challenging and exciting. On one hand, it is challenging since religion is *not* the main concentration for most of my students. They have enrolled in the university to become medical professionals such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, or other health-related specialists. On the other hand, it is exciting since the students come to the university from a variety of faith backgrounds and religious traditions. Each student, regardless of program of study or religious background, is *required* to take one religion class per year. Of course, Loma Linda University is not alone in this requirement.

### The Context

Loma Linda University (LLU) is a part of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist educational system, which

emphasizes “wholeness” in its educational curriculum at all levels—in other words, education must involve the development of the whole person: physical, mental, spiritual, and social. The university curriculum is designed to intentionally facilitate students’ growth in these areas, and students are encouraged to not only develop their academic skills, but also their emotional and spiritual capacities.

To ask medical professionals<sup>1</sup> to take religion classes amidst their heavy and burdensome academic schedule is a major request. I have found that many of my students (at least initially) wonder why they must take such classes. Maybe their reaction would be different if they knew that in the early 1900s, the required curriculum for the first medical students at the College of Medical Evangelists (the name was changed to Loma Linda University in 1961) comprised primarily of religion classes and very few medical classes.<sup>2</sup> But

that being said—the challenge remains real.

Also, since students enrolled at the university are from all over the world, the classrooms contain a mixture of students from various religious traditions—Catholic and Protestant Christians, Mormons, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims—to mention a few.<sup>3</sup> Even students who are Seventh-day Adventists differ in their commitment to and understanding of their own denomination. To complicate things—it is not unusual that a few students will be atheists or agnostics.

My classes so far have been related to Adventist history and Adventism’s health traditions. So, the question is: How do you introduce such topics to such a vastly diverse group of students, some of whom have no particular interest in religion or Ad-

ventism? Could it be that our classrooms have become a “mission field”? Or as Richard Hart, LLU president, recently asked: “Has the time come when we should openly invite students of other faiths to join our campuses as we look to share our message and strengthen our academic offerings?”<sup>4</sup>

While I do not believe that the classroom is a place for proselytizing or that my job is to make students Seventh-day Adventists, I do think that it is my obligation to share and present Adventism for what it is and to make students aware of my faith tradition in the best possible way. After all, I have personally decided to be a Seventh-day Adventist, and my students should know why I have made this choice and commitment. Principles such as the nature of God’s character and how it is revealed in the Bible and nature, the plan of redemption designed to restore humanity’s relationship with God, embracing a life of service to others, preparing academically to fulfill God’s call in one’s life, and achieving spiritual, mental, physical balance, are all central to Adventist education.<sup>5</sup> And, professionals trained at an Adventist institution using a curriculum designed to integrate Christian faith with the study of health and the sciences<sup>6</sup> should know how these principles impact the lives of those who instruct them, and ultimately, the service they, themselves, will one day render to others. Of course, I have to also admit some bias since my professional interests are Adventist studies and history.

So, the question is—How are we to share the Adventist story in the classroom? And can we make it relevant to this new generation of youth in the 21st century? In the next section, I will give three perspectives (approaches) that I have found helpful as I have taught the Adventist heritage of health at Loma Linda University. Then I will conclude with some general observations on why these perspectives can be useful for intro-

ducing Adventism as a path to spirituality and a meaningful relationship with God.

### Sharing Adventism in the Classroom

Since I am teaching mostly classes related to Adventist history on health, my experience has taught me to use three major perspectives in order to make these classes interesting, informative, and exciting: storytelling, authenticity, and personal experience.

#### *Cultivate the Art of Storytelling*

First, I have begun using an updated version of the “new-old” technique of teaching Adventist history by means of stories. This technique, used by Jesus and recorded throughout the Gospels, engaged and stimulated His listeners. In *Christ’s Object Lessons* we learn that in Jesus’ use of stories “He secured [His hearers’] attention and impressed their hearts.”<sup>7</sup> There are several benefits of teaching through stories. First, it makes learning enjoyable. Second, it puts the academic information within its proper context. And third, it helps students to retain, learn, and recall information much more effectively and efficiently. As John Walsh has pointed out, the majority of our audiences today “think in stories, they remember stories, and they will listen if you tell stories.”<sup>8</sup>

Melanie C. Green, whose research examined the impact of narratives on individual beliefs, agrees: “the power of stories has been recognized for centuries, and even today, in Hollywood and beyond, storytelling is a multi-million-dollar business. Stories are a natural mode of thinking; before our formal education begins, we are already learning from Aesop’s fables, fairy tales, or family history. Indeed, some researchers have even claimed that all knowledge comes in the form of stories. . . . Although this strong claim has been questioned, it is generally agreed that stories are a power-

ful structure for organizing and transmitting information, and for creating meaning in our lives and environments.”<sup>9</sup>

In my particular context of teaching the Adventist heritage of health, I have observed that using this method helps students to understand the development of Adventist thinking on the subject of health and to appreciate Adventist contributions to health and healthful living. What is fascinating and new, however, is that through the Adventist story, I am able to share

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significant issues that relate to morality, ethics, social justice, culture, service, and so much more. Ultimately, of course, this enables me to share the supernatural story of God and guide students to realize (or at least become aware of) their spiritual needs. As noted above, this is a unique part of the Adventist educational tradition. The use of stories, therefore, is a useful tool to achieve important educational purposes.

#### *Be Real—Share the True Story*

A second perspective that I have found helpful when sharing Adven-

tism in the classroom has to do with the concept of being “real.” I not only tell the Adventist story, but also share the *true story* of my church. Seventh-day Adventists have often had the tendency to idealize their movement. (To be fair, this is also a temptation for any religious group or organization.) Take, for example, one of the main founders and visionary leaders of the Adventist Church—Ellen G. White. Possibly because of her prophetic status, her image has often

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been *mis*-represented. Perhaps we, as church members eager to protect her reputation, have unintentionally created this unreal and unrealistic holy persona to which no one can relate. Consequently, there are those who reject her writings and claim she is no longer relevant. There are also those who magnify her writings beyond their legitimate prophetic significance. Both of these perspectives are damaging to Adventism and its mission.

Sharing the Adventist story is important, but sharing the *true story* of Adventism is by far more important and essential in explaining our heritage to members of our church and to the world. One example that I often share with my students is the marital relationship between Ellen White and her husband, James White. While it seems that they truly loved each other, like all families, they also had their struggles. In 1876, for instance, James was in the eastern United States doing evangelism while Ellen stayed in the West. Judging from some messages that Ellen White wrote to her friend, Lucinda Hall, we know that the Whites went through some major disagreements. In fact, Ellen and James White were contemplating living and working “apart” from each other (at least for a while) since they felt they could not tolerate each other’s company. The tone in those letters was anything but Christian. It took several correspondences until Ellen White realized that she needed to apologize to her husband and ask for forgiveness. She also asked Lucinda, her friend, to burn her letters as she felt embarrassed at having written them.<sup>10</sup>

My point is that giving the true story helps students to relate correctly to the Adventist story and consequently to apply and relate it to their own story. After all, the candid reality of Adventist history reveals the principle that God is more than willing to work with imperfect, struggling people who desperately need Him and His amazing grace. And this is the “good news” that we find in the Scriptures. In fact, this must be the core of any evangelism that we attempt to do. The story of Adventism is not a perfect story,<sup>11</sup> but that is precisely why it can, if presented accurately, be attractive and appealing to students and people in general.

#### *Challenge Students to Experience God*

My third perspective relates to the above point. I encourage my students to *experience* God personally before

making any judgment about the importance of spirituality in their own lives. My logic is simple: “You cannot evaluate a chocolate before you taste it.” From an Adventist context, such a test is logical.

Writing on the topic of education in the early 1900s, Ellen White noted that its primary aim was (and must always be) to bring students into a personal relationship with God. Within the context of the Great Controversy story, she penned: “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one. . . . To aid the student in comprehending these principles, and in entering into that relation with Christ which will make them a controlling power in the life, should be the teacher’s first effort and his constant aim. The teacher who accepts this aim is in truth a co-worker with Christ, a laborer together with God.”<sup>12</sup>

Beyond that, she saw the ultimate revelation of true education in *service* for the good of humanity (or what we call “mission” today). “Our ideas of education,” she wrote, “take too narrow and too low a range. . . . True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It *prepares the student for the joy of service in this world*, and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”<sup>13</sup>

In line with that, I ask all of my students to read Ellen White’s book *The Ministry of Healing*. The benefit is twofold in helping students to understand the book’s relevance to them and to LLU. First, this 1905 publication, a compilation of several of Ellen White’s writings on health and disease prevention, was originally designated as a book from which the proceeds would be used to



provide financial support and debt relief for Adventist sanitariums.<sup>14</sup> Initially, what is now Loma Linda University (LLU) began as Loma Linda Sanitarium and later became the College of Medical Evangelists (CME) where nurses and doctors were trained. When CME became LLU, the expanded curriculum included graduate education and training for various fields of study within the health sciences. Second, the book explains the general Adventist philosophy of health and its relation to mission. Surprisingly (or maybe not so surprisingly), this book has had a huge impact on many of my LLU students as they read and study the Adventist story of health and healthful living. So, let me share with you some of their responses before I offer some concluding remarks on how teachers can apply the above principles to

youth evangelism on Adventist college and university campuses today.

At the end of my classes, I ask students to respond to this question: *How do you think knowing the Adventist story of health will impact your future practice of medicine and/or your personal life?*<sup>15</sup> One student, a Christian wrote:

“Before entering Loma Linda University, I knew very little about Seventh-day Adventists, their mission, and their works. Since entering this school, interacting with SDA classmates, and of course, after having taken this class on SDA history, I have come to greatly appreciate the SDA mission and to understand the meaning of “To Make Man Whole.” I absolutely love the wholistic approach to healing—mind, body, and

spirit. As Ellen White emphasized in her book, *The Ministry of Healing*, the three are interconnected and to be sick in one area will affect all others as well. . . . This course has been very enjoyable for the background of why LLU has its motto: “To Make Man Whole” . . . and why our very education is structured the way it is. This course has made me even more appreciative to be receiving my education here.”

Another student, not particularly religious, noted:

“I came into this class very skeptical of a religious class for I don’t consider myself of a particular religion. . . . As the class progressed through the weeks and I began to understand the SDA philosophy, I found myself agreeing more and more [with it]. I believe this class has strengthened my relationship with God immensely. Especially from reading *The Ministry of Healing*—the concept of prayer became more clear to me as a personal connection with God. . . . I intend to bring prayer in my [future] medical practice.”

Here is a short excerpt from a non-Christian student:

“Coming into this class, I had no idea what to expect or how to relate it to my future occupation. Was it going to be a boring history class that enumerates dates after dates in a chronological order? I was dreading that. However, halfway through the class, I started to get interested and started to realize that all these [health] principles are applicable to me and my future occupation. Subjects like a balanced life and wholeness are absolutely essential in PT. As a physical therapist, I try to think of preventive care versus immediate symptom treatment. This absolutely overlaps with the principles that Seventh-day Adventists follow. . . . Knowledge of how to live a balanced life will benefit me and my patients in the long run.”

And here is a response from a

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Seventh-day Adventist student:

“This class has given me a more wholesome view of Adventist practices, the reasons behind them, and the health message. I was actually born into the Adventist Church, but didn’t grow up going to Adventist schools. Though my parents and church taught me about God and the Bible, I must confess I didn’t know much of the background of my own church. . . . This course has helped me reflect on my beliefs and look into the reasoning behind why I have always lived a certain way. Many times, growing up, Seventh-day Adventist beliefs just seemed like silly rules—not being able to go to a friend’s birthday party on a Friday night or eat a pepperoni pizza. After much reading and pondering on Ellen G. White’s writings (which I hadn’t done much of before), I realized that there is a reason to it . . . It is about choosing to live a better life; to be able to hold an even better relationship with Christ; and be more able to do God’s work.

“I think many of the things will be of value to me because I do want to live a life to serve God, and this class has not only helped me learn how I can do that but has also encouraged me to do so.”

**Conclusions: Perspectives on Adventist Identity**

Several conclusions can be drawn as a result of the experiences I have had with my students. The Adventist story, I believe, can help students in their search for a meaningful spiritual experience with God. First, teaching the Adventist story may help young people achieve a sense of identity. Knowing who they are gives people a sense of belonging, a sense of being a part of a community—something bigger than their individual selves. Richard Rice was right when he noted that “community is the most important element of Christian existence. Believing, behaving, and be-

longing are all essential to the Christian life, but belonging is more important, more fundamental than the others.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, the first church of Christianity grew rapidly because believers belonged to a community that cared for one another (see Acts 2:46 and 4:32; Galatians 6:10).

Second, the Adventist story can be used as a tool for teaching biblical beliefs and practices. For instance, the Adventist story is fascinating because it attempts to resemble the two major concerns of Jesus—the *future* and the *now*. On one hand, Jesus taught people about the kingdom of God that was coming—the *future*. On the other hand, He was constantly concerned with people and their present needs—the *now*. It is notable that Ellen White pointed out that “Jesus devoted more time to healing the sick than to preaching.”<sup>17</sup>

Adventism has the same two concerns. The second coming of Jesus is a major denominational belief. Its significance is underlined in the fact that it is even a part of our church’s name. This concept is especially comforting, since it gives hope and meaning to a world that endures suffering, injustice, and fear because of sin and its consequences. However, Adventists are also concerned with life here and now. It is no accident, I think, that our church’s health system and education system are among the largest operated by any Protestant denomination.<sup>18</sup> Adventist medical missionaries are literally serving humanity in all parts of the world. And this is a part of Adventist evangelism.

Knowing the Adventist story, then, is essential for the identity and mission of a student in an Adventist school.<sup>19</sup>

Third, sharing Adventism reminds us of the importance of being authentic and real. Authenticity means allowing others to see our vulnerability. In addition, it builds trust. The Adventist story is a real-life story of struggling people. Curiously, we may note that the whole Sabbath-keeping movement was started by young people who were not perfect, but who were eager to serve God despite their flaws and disappointments. What is distinctive about Seventh-day Adventists, then, is not their vast biblical knowledge of prophecy or their theology but their willingness to serve God and fulfill His mission by bringing the everlasting gospel to a dying world. It is an authentic, down-to-earth story, and at our founding, a story of youth by youth.

A fourth lesson is the emphasis on personal experience. By its very essence, faith in God cannot be forced on people no matter how logical one’s reasoning may be. In fact, logic cannot fully explain the Divine. Spiritual realities, therefore, cannot be imposed, they must be experienced. True Adventism, by its very essence (and history) encourages young and old to take time to experience God for themselves in order to make an intelligent decision about Him.

Thus, I believe that the Adventist story can be a great tool for introducing faith to the younger generations.

Young people are drawn to communities of like-minded people with stories similar to theirs. They also are willing to listen to those who are real and authentic, and who dislike artificiality—those who desire to experience things for themselves. Adventist educators will do well to work with these principles in mind. ✍

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Loma Linda University prepares medical professionals for service with programs that uniquely integrate Christian faith with the study of health and the sciences. Visit <https://home.llu.edu/programs> for a comprehensive list of programs of study offered.

2. For more on why religion courses are required in Adventist graduate programs, see Gerald R. Winslow, "Why the Study of Religion Belongs in Adventist Graduate Programs," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 68:3 (February/March 2006): 27-32: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200668032706.pdf>; and Mark F. Carr, "Commonality and Character: Essential Elements of Reli-

gious Instruction," *ibid.* 68:5 (Summer 2006): 15-20: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200668051506.pdf>; and Michael E. Cafferky, "The Study of Religion in Graduate Degree Programs: Opportunities and Structural Issues," *ibid.* 76:5 (Summer 2014): 30-36: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201476053007.pdf>.

3. Recruiting non-Adventist students is already the norm in Adventist higher education outside of North America. The data also make clear that Adventist colleges and universities in North America have begun to go into the same direction. Instead of being centers of learning primarily for Adventists, our campuses are increasingly enrolling students of other faith traditions. See General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, *2019 Annual Statistical Report* (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2019): <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2019.pdf>, 56-60; and Jared Wright, "Recruiting Non-Adventist Students Already the Norm in Adventist Higher Education," *Spectrum* (April 26, 2017): <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2017/04/26/recruiting-non-adventist-students-already-norm-adventist-higher-education>.

4. Richard Hart, "Being Distinctive or Being Inclusive?" *Notes From the President* (April 6, 2017): <https://myllu.llu.edu/news/oftheweek/story/?id=30218>.

5. Humberto Rasi et al., "A Statement of Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy" (April 2001): [https://education.adventist.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/10/A\\_Statement\\_of\\_Seventh-day\\_Adventist\\_Educational\\_Philosophy\\_2001.pdf](https://education.adventist.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/10/A_Statement_of_Seventh-day_Adventist_Educational_Philosophy_2001.pdf).

6. Loma Linda University, "Mission and Values" (n.d.): <https://home.llu.edu/about-llu/mission-and-values>.

7. See Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1941), 21. See also Barbara J. Fisher, "Bible Stories in the Classroom: The Why and How," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 77:1 (October/November 2014): 24-31: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201477012408.pdf>; and Charles Teel, Jr., "Mission Stories and the Adventist Future: Fernando and Anna Stahl as a Case Study," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 53:2 (October 1990-January 1991): 16-46: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae199053021606.pdf>.

8. John Walsh, *The Art of Storytelling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Publishers, 2014), 21.

9. Melanie C. Green, "Storytelling in Teaching," *Observer* 17:4 (April 2004): <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/storytelling-in-teaching>.

10. See Ellen White's letters to Lucinda Hall, May 10, May 12, May 16, May 17, 1876, Heritage Research Center, Loma Linda University, California (Lt 64, 1876: <https://m.egwwritings.org/es/book/3508.1#0>). For additional context, see Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God: Messages Especially for Women* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1998), 263-275; and Gilbert M. Valentine's *J. N. Andrews: Mission Pioneer, Evangelist, and Thought Leader* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2019).

11. See George R. Knight's books *From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1987); *I Used to Be Perfect: A Study of Sin and Salvation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2001); and *The Pharisee's Guide to Perfect Holiness: A Study of Sin and Salvation* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1992).

12. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1952), 30.

13. *Ibid.*, 13. Italics supplied.

14. Edwin Rubin Palmer, "Relief for Our Sanitariums," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 82:36 (September 7, 1905): 18: <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19050907-V82-36.pdf>; Loma Linda University, "History," (n.d.): <https://medicine.llu.edu/about/history>; Loma Linda University, "Time line," (n.d.): <https://home.llu.edu/about-llu/history/timeline>.

15. These responses come from an essay that I ask students to write as part of their final exam for the course Adventist Heritage and Health. I have kept the students' original responses and reproduced them here.

16. Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, Calif.: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), 6.

17. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1905), 19.

18. General Conference Department of Education, "Seventh-day Adventist Education Statistics" (2018): <https://education.adventist.org/education-statistics/>; ASTR, "Quick Statistics on the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (2018): <https://www.adventistarchives.org/quick-statistics-on-the-seventh-day-adventist-church>.

19. It is interesting to note that during the 2018 Spring and Autumn Councils of the General Conference Executive Committee, time was set aside for personal testimonies addressing the question, "Who Are We, and Why Are We Here?"