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The Centered Set: How Adventist Colleges and Universities
Can Thrive and Fulfill Their Mission in the 21st Century

Dr. Don Williams

Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences

Most of us are aware of the Adventist schools circling the globe whose enrollment, and perhaps even survival, depends on matriculating students who do not come from Seventh-day Adventist backgrounds. In most cases church members are happy to support those institutions with their tithe and mission offerings.

However, the rapid growth of several third world schools as well as increased numbers of non-Adventist students in North American Division schools has raised concerns as to whether the mission of church related schools is being watered down. When that trend is combined with the steady drop in the percentage of SDA students attending Adventist schools, the viability of this once robust system is being called into question. From articles in *Spectrum* to books published by the denominational press such as *How to Kill Adventist Education (And How to Give it a Fighting Chance)* by Anderson, (2009), concerned church members are seeking to find ways to turn these trends around before it is too late. This paper will look at the adaptation of a traditional model that has proven to successfully address the inclusion of non-church members into the church's institutions of higher learning.

Floyd Greenleaf, in his work *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (2005), tells the story of the development of mission school education in Africa. Solusi is for him the model of the Adventist mission school. Started on a 12,000 acre gift from Cecil Rhodes, head of the British South Africa Company, Solusi became a center in the spread of the gospel in that part of Africa (p. 177). Converting and then training the future teachers of the Adventist church in Africa, Solusi developed a system of smaller outlying schools which enrolled over 3000 students by the second decade of the 20th century (p. 176). Solusi also became an Ellen White approved model of when it was appropriate to accept government largess at an SDA educational institution (p. 190).

In India, as the Adventist work spread, so did the mission school concept.

“Similar to Adventist schools in Africa, the original purpose of Adventist schools [in India] was to convert student to Adventism rather than preserving Adventist children to the church—at first there were no Adventist children to preserve—but they also prepared workers...It was from the elementary and mission schools that the church realized membership gains.” (Greenleaf, 2005, p. 182)

In this country with strong Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Adventist education became a critical evangelistic tool. “As G.G. Lowry envisioned it, the mission school was the most important vehicle to carry the gospel to the Indian masses” (Greenleaf, 2005, p. 268).

From the above accounts, it is clear that the liberal-arts-for-Adventists has not been the only way the church has provided mission-driven education. One of the misconceptions addressed by George Knight in *Myths in Adventism* (1985) is whether there has been a single blueprint for successful Adventist education. Quoting Ellen White concerning this, Knight says,

“Again in 1907 she wrote regarding the Madison School which was doing its best to follow the ‘pattern’ under Adventism’s most zealous educational reformers, that ‘no exact picture can be given for the establishment of schools in new fields. The climate, the surroundings, the condition of the country, and the means at hand with which to work must all bear a part in shaping the work (CT, p. 531).’” (1985, pp. 18, 19)

From its earliest years, the church utilized several models of education. From the implementation of the classical model of education at Battle Creek College, to the establishment of the Avondale Model endorsed by Ellen White, to the development of the schools in Africa, India and China, Adventist education adapted to fit the time, place and needs of the surrounding population.

So what does this all have to say to 21st century Adventist education in North America? Let us begin with some basic facts. The North American Division has 15 colleges and universities ranging in size from small (under 400) to medium size (4000+) for private institutions. Their educational offerings fall into two broad categories, liberal arts and health

professions. Not surprisingly their student bodies divide along these lines as well. The 12 liberal arts colleges cater largely to the Adventist church. The three health professions schools, Loma Linda University, Kettering College of Medical Arts and Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences enroll students from within the church as well as from the larger community. Non-Seventh-day Adventist students in the former group range from 4% – 30% of the student body. The latter three institutions have enrollments of the same group ranging from just over 50% to 90% (*World Report 2007*, p. 55).

While Loma Linda, Kettering and Florida Hospital College do not fit the traditional mission school model which is still effective in many places around the world. They are an important variation on that theme which may provide a powerful model for the other NAD institutions of higher education. Their model recognizes trends already affecting church's educational system. It also builds in a mission approach can help address the unique challenges faced by the growing number of non-SDA students, faculty and staff.

From this author's perspective, the success of these school is based on the concept of the centered set. Centered sets and their converse, bounded sets, are sociological models used to define the organizing principles behind group membership. From a religious perspective, centered set institutions identify an individual's movement toward or away from Christ as the defining principle for "membership". In contrast, bounded sets have a proscribed set of criteria such as doctrines or religious practices which help a church know who is in or out of their group.

Frost and Hirsch in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come* (2003) use the agricultural metaphor of wells and fences to illustrate their understanding of centered and bounded sets. In Australia, water wells rather than fences are used to control herds of cattle or sheep. Providing a source of water keeps the livestock centered geographically (p. 47). In contrast, livestock in

America are largely controlled by fences. And so, according to Frost and Hirsch (2003), Christ centered rather than doctrinally oriented churches are more likely to draw individuals to the Center, the Source of living water (See John 3:14,15).

Bruce Bauer (2008), an Adventist missiologist, identifies three characteristics of bounded sets. One, they are created by “listing essential characteristics”. Two, “objects inside the set share [common] characteristics”. And three, these sets identify who is either inside or outside of their boundaries. For Bauer (2008) a centered set church places Jesus at the center. And while baptism (and therefore church membership) still plays an important role at the beginning of the Christian life, discipleship, with its goal of moving people toward the center, is the end.

The adoption of this orientation within an educational model has important implications. Schools using a centered set approach need not consider church membership as the only rationale for identifying target markets. Using the centered set, however, does not eliminate the teaching of Adventist doctrine in bible classes since Adventist doctrines should be defined in Christ-centered terms.

However, with this approach, students who are not members of the Adventist church could be considered part of the marketing mix. If an institution has made its faith orientation clear, any student interested in growing within that environment should be considered for admission. Both Loma Linda and Florida Hospital College have statements of mission on their recommendation forms. Individuals asked to complete those forms are encouraged to give their feedback on whether that prospect is a good fit in light of the school’s mission.

Inclusion of these students can help schools fulfill their evangelistic mission (See Ellen White in *Education* p. 30). They also provide a healthy, real-world environment for SDA students to prepare for their lives and careers. At the same time this approach can help ensure

economic viability of the institutions for the education of the church's children. Sadly if the financial rationale is placed first, the mission/evangelistic goal may be watered down or missed altogether.

All of this means that institutions using the centered set orientation must be very purposeful in their mission emphasis. This is critical not only for the success of this approach, but for the true success of the institution. For example, at FHCHS each academic department has committed to having prayer and a devotional thought before each class period. Even online course chats begin with prayer requests and prayer.

With the presence of students from a wide variety of backgrounds, no assumptions can be made about what the students already know or believe, no aspect of school life should be left unaffected by the overall spiritual mission of the College. Every employee hired should be screened for mission fit, not just for church affiliation. Every course should be designed with the spiritual/moral/ethical development of the student in mind.

This framework can provide a theological rationale for what is already happening in Adventist colleges and universities. As seen from the enrollment statistics above, non-SDA students are already a significant presence on some campuses. Many are in graduate and evening adult education programs. One institution is contemplating a partnership with the local community college. Others are opening programs in response to needs in their state rather than just in their Adventist constituency.

This proposal is not based on the belief that more traditional Adventist institutions don't care about the mission impact of these factors. The concern it does address is that the church does not have a model that can guide the demographic changes taking place to ensure the decisions and their consequences are mission driven. If the non-SDA students are admitted to

solve financial problems, spiritual opportunities may be missed and important services neglected. For example, what should the chaplain's office, student services or residence halls look like with a significant number of students coming from non-Adventist or non-Christian backgrounds?

Caveats

Like any approach, there are weaknesses and dangers inherent in adopting the centered set. One of the most obvious is the fact that parents send their children to SDA colleges not only to find a career, but potentially to find a life partner. At a school where there are a significant number students who are not church members, the odds increase that those students from Adventist homes might fall in love with someone outside that circle.

With that reality in mind, several countervailing factors must also be noted. If this type of school is able to attract Adventist students who might have ended up at a public institution, they will at least have greater odds of meeting an Adventist mate in one of these schools than in the public sector. Also, one of the realities of Adventist students living in this more diverse environment is that they have the potential of ending up with a stronger, clearer sense of their own spiritual values. The student who has solidified his or her faith in a diverse spiritual environment will be more likely to make the right choice.

Perhaps the greatest concern expressed by the church organization of the trend of accepting more non-SDA students is that creeping compromise will accompany it. The possibility of this happening increases if this direction is taken for the wrong reason (economic) or without a clear mission in mind. This has not been the case with the traditional mission schools when they have stayed true to their mission mentality.

The works of two men are often cited when raising this specter, Philip Marsden in his study of the drift to secularism in the Ivy League schools in *The Soul of the American University*

(1994), and James Burtchaell's similar study of smaller denominationally related schools in his work *The Dying of the Light* (1998). Both authors document the drift away from spiritual mission and denominational orientation by many well known and respected schools such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Duke and Wake Forest. Their works should act as a cautionary tale for Adventist education. The factors identified by these authors are as follows:

1. Weak or tangential denominational linkage from the beginning of the school
2. Spiritual matters relegated to the religion department or the service sectors on campus
3. A clear identification by the faculty with larger trends in society such as evolution in the sciences and post modernism in the humanities
4. A decline and disappearance of financial and leadership support from the founding denomination
5. A desire to be open and tolerant of all points of view – a movement away from the truths and absolutes identifiable at the founding of these institutions.

The concerns expressed by these authors are real and must be addressed, but they are not inevitable. For example, there is a difference between intellectual drift toward a particular position (or for that matter away from one), and a well thought out decision to take a particular position and provide the support to make it happen. In the case of the centered set approach, a conscious choice is made to enroll a more diverse population. That does not mean a corresponding watering down of beliefs or mission. In fact, it may mean a more intentional mission, and more clearly chosen theological positions.

Conclusion

Does Adventism need another model of higher education? The downward trend in enrollment, the increased numbers of students from other faiths at institutions of higher education all demand the church look at new approaches. The centered set may provide the necessary adaptation of the mission school model that will help the church reverse the enrollment spiral in ways that will contribute to the mission of the church.

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