

Town and Gown: Enhancing Relationships Between College and Community

Our colleges/universities should be seen as placing a premium on a life of study, prayer, devotion, trust, openness, community, service, and loyalty, which then serves as a model for students.

When the 20th century began, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America already operated seven colleges. By the beginning of the 21st century, a remarkable eight more higher education institutions had been added to a North American denomination with only 900,000 members in its territory—the largest commitment to higher education by any denomination. The continuing success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can be attributed in large measure to the strength of its higher education programs.

Historical Developments

As we examine the mission of Adventist higher education for the 21st century, the relationship between the “town” (church) and the “gown” (Adventist colleges/universities) is vital to the denomination’s future.¹

In medieval times, when the concept of a university developed, the relationship between “town” and “gown” could be difficult. If our colleges had developed in medieval Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries, we might have had walls around the little towns surrounding our schools. Castles serving as places of learning might have dominated the view from afar. Our campus stores would have been the centers of commerce. Student living quarters would have been privately procured in surrounding neighborhoods. The college church would have been a cathedral. A more important cathedral would be in development—a “cathedral of intellect”—because this was the time when the roots of today’s modern college devel-

By Richard Osborn



Former Pacific Union College (PUC) President Malcolm Maxwell (right) congratulates Richard Osborn at his inauguration, February 7, 2002.

oped.² Guilds of carpenters, barbers, merchants, teachers, or students would be formed in these towns into a *universitas*, a corporation to oversee the trade, whether it be cutting hair or learning between teachers and students.

The relationship between town and gown came into focus. Student guilds dominated the life of towns. Students hired and fired their professors. They “fined them for unexcused absences or lateness, for wandering from their subject, and for dodging difficult questions” or leaving the really difficult questions until the end of the class.³ Tensions developed between town and gown.

What about the universities’ relationship to the church? The medieval university served as both a restraining and liberating influence.

As a restraining influence, historian Freidrich Heer writes that “the university was a stronghold of the Faith, the bulwark of the Papal Church, the instrument of kings, prelates and religious orders . . .” As a liberating influence, medieval universities were “oases of freedom, where all those questions which elsewhere were suppressed, and forbidden were discussed with what hostile critics described as brazen impudence.” The religious leaders had mixed feelings about the university. In 1290, the papal legate who eventually became Pope Boniface VIII belittled the University of Paris:

“At Rome we account them more foolish than the ignorant, men who have poisoned by their teaching not only themselves but also the entire world. You masters . . . have made all your learning and doctrine a laughing-stock . . . It is all trivial . . . To us your fame is mere folly and smoke . . . We are called by God not to acquire wisdom or dazzle mankind but to save our souls.”⁴

What can we learn from this history of 700 years ago about the relationship between town and gown?

Threats

As in medieval times, the relationship between town and

gown can be strained. It has been described by one Christian author as an “uneasy partnership.”⁵ Like those of old, today’s colleges provide both a restraining and a liberating influence. Church administrators and constituents express fears that our colleges may follow the pattern of secularization of many colleges that began as church-related institutions.⁶

This struggle between town and gown in the church is part of a larger issue—finding the soul of the church. What does it mean to be a Seventh-day Adventist today? Does our identity center around the 27 Fundamental Beliefs or around a small core of beliefs, most of which we share with broader Christianity? Do we believe in present and progressive truth? What is the role of Adventist higher education in this process? Will the greater openness found on college campuses lead the church and its young people away from its fundamental teachings and purpose or toward a revitalized mission? Because of the criti-



Laboratory students at PUC.

cal thinking skills honed in graduate school and the nature of higher education, an inherent tension has developed that reflects broader fears as the church struggles to find a balance between traditional institutional values and a changing society.

Suggestions for Mission

As town and gown work with each other, what are the reciprocal obligations of each?

1. Jesus Christ at the Center

The best way to ensure a positive relationship between town and gown is to place Jesus Christ at the center. Charles Malik, former United Nations diplomat from Lebanon and a leader in the Eastern Orthodox Church, delivered a series of lectures in 1981, *A Christian Critique of the University*. He suggests:

“Jesus Christ exists in himself and he holds the entire world, including the university, in the palm of his hands. . . . We are thinking of Jesus Christ first, and all along and in his light we see the university. Least of all are we thinking of ourselves and our opinion. . . . I know of no more important question to ask than: What does Jesus Christ think of the university?”⁷

2. The Intellectual Life

The role of church leaders at all levels has changed. In the early days, leaders primarily served as spiritual leaders who spent much time on serious Bible study and prayer. They now conform to a more corporate model of leadership that stresses management, boards, and policies, and have extensive travel responsibilities. We unrealistically expect church leaders to have multiple gifts—to be theologians, evangelists, teachers, pastors, communicators, authors, media personalities, technology experts, and financiers.

In order to deal with the enormous challenges of secularism and fundamentalism facing Adventism in the 21st century, we need havens of safety for church workers to pursue the intellectual life.⁸ Our colleges/universities should be seen as placing a premium on a life of study, prayer, devotion, trust, openness, community, service, and loyalty, which then serves as a model for students. James Sire, former editor of InterVarsity Press, emphasizes this role in *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling*. He defines a Christian intellectual as follows:

“An intellectual is one who loves ideas, is dedicated to clarifying them, developing them, criticizing them, turning them over and over, seeing their implications, stacking them atop one another, arranging them, sitting silent while new ideas pop up and old ones seem to rearrange themselves, playing with them, punning with their terminology, laughing at them, watching them clash, picking up the pieces, starting over, judging them, withholding judgment about them, changing them, bringing them into contact with their counterparts in other systems of thought, inviting them to dine and have a ball but also suiting them for service in a workaday life. A Christian intellectual is all of the above to the glory of God.”⁹

Too often, Christians have become anti-intellectual, fearing to allow people to use their minds. After reviewing the lives of Moses, Solomon, Daniel, and Paul, Arthur Holmes comments that “[t]here is clearly no incompatibility between vital faith and deep, disciplined, wide-ranging learning, between piety and hard thinking, between the life of faith and the life of the mind. . . . Biblical faith had no room for anti-intellectualism; instead, faith and learning were mutually supportive and mutually enriching.”¹⁰

Ellen White also encouraged educators to embrace this kind of life:

“Those who have entered upon the work of teaching, or who

have been called to any position of responsibility, should not be satisfied to take the product of the researches of other minds, but they should investigate truth for themselves. If they do not form the habit of investigating themes of truth for themselves, they will become superficial in their life and acquirements. The opinions of your associates may be of value to you, but you should not rely upon them and have no definite ideas of your own. You should examine the truths you have been led to believe, until you know they are without a flaw.”¹¹

In the 20th century, some Adventist colleges underwent trauma as professors lost jobs over such issues as church loyalty in the area of doctrines. This established a tone that has discouraged implementation of Ellen White’s counsel at the very place where church workers have the time and ability to engage in such study. In the 21st century, we must restore that valuable role as a church, at the same time recognizing the mutual respect town and gown must share in the pursuit of truth.



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3. Adventist Colleges/Universities as Think Tanks

Too often, we have placed academics on church committees only if they have a particular philosophical perspective, robbing the church of the insights of some of its finest theologians, scientists, and historians. We need the input of a wide-ranging group of committed Adventist scholars to help us solve the great array of challenges facing the church.

Ellen White stressed:

“There is no excuse for any one in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. . . . We should be teachable, meek, and lowly of heart.”¹²

The church should begin to treat our colleges/universities as valuable think tanks and as a conscience. In turn, our educational institutions should carry out their mission with great respect for the teachings of the church and with humility, utilizing the processes developed by the church for the exploration of new truth. Both must remember the words of Jesus in John 14:6—“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to



An Adventist college should create a stimulating intellectual climate where students and faculty members discuss ideas and apply a Christian worldview to the challenges of life.

the Father, except through me” (NKJV).

4. An Adventist Worldview

The importance of defining, teaching, and embodying an Adventist worldview can be found in the research of Steven Garber, formerly of the interdisciplinary faculty of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities in Washington, D.C. After interviewing many adults with a coherent Christian faith, he concluded that without exception they possessed three traits—while in college, they had formed a worldview sufficient for the challenges of the modern world; found a teacher who incarnated that worldview; and forged friendships with people whose common life was embedded in that worldview.¹³

Garber’s last point emphasizes the ongoing need for college graduates to develop positive relationships with other believers and for local congregations to provide warmth, spiritual care, and intellectual stimulation. Few of our churches have vibrant young adult programs that keep our graduates connected with a local congregation. Our colleges/universities in the 21st century must do a better job of defining the Adventist worldview, helping professors and staff members convey that worldview to our students, and then working with local conferences and churches to cultivate congregations where that worldview becomes a reality. One possibility would be for colleges to act like a church placement agency, placing graduates in local congregations in order to help them in the transition to the world of work or to graduate school.¹⁴

5. Public Duty

Donald Kennedy, former president of Stanford University, argues that “as our society needs higher education, so higher education needs public trust.” He continues:

“The struggle about the universities has little or nothing to do with Right and Left, or with cultural relativism, or with race relations . . . It has to do with how we see our duty and how our patrons and clients see it. If we can clarify our perception of duty and gain public acceptance of it, we will have fulfilled an important obligation to the society that nurtures us. That obligation constitutes the highest institutional form of academic duty.”¹⁵

While most Adventist colleges enjoy a high level of public trust in our church, we can do better in raising confidence as we work together. As education institutions (gown), we have a duty to stress the unique, wholistic philosophy of Adventist education. We must be value-laden rather than value-free. We have a duty to find the middle ground between professionalization and indoctrination. We can help our constituency to understand that one of our duties is to help young people explore truth for themselves while nurturing that exploration in a loving Christian learning community.¹⁶

On the other hand, the town (church) has a duty to provide the school with its best students, adequate subsidies, personnel, verbal and nonverbal support, and employment opportunities. The town should see the gown as its extended arm. The town should understand that all three great institutions of the church—the family, congregation, and school—must work together to

succeed in developing faith maturity and denominational loyalty. The town must publicly show its trust in the gown’s mission.

Conclusion

The Psalmist wrote, “Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell” (Psalm 43:3, NIV). Adventist colleges/universities are at the holy mountain where God dwells. May the relationship between town and gown become even more positive as we prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I first discussed the relationship between town and gown in a Sabbath sermon during the inaugural weekend activities for Randal Wisbey at Canadian University College on November 14, 1998. These ideas were further developed at a La Sierra University Board Retreat on January 22, 1999, and the North American Division Education Advisory on May 19, 1999.
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3. Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 240.
4. Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 195, 196.
5. Merrimon Cuninggim, *Uneasy Partners. The College and the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1994).
6. For a summary of these trends, see Richard Osborn, “Employing Non-Adventist Professors: An Unwanted Necessity, Creation of a ‘Real’ University, or ‘Slippery Slope’?” *Journal of Adventist Education* 62:4 (April/May 2000), pp. 27-32.
7. Charles Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University* (Waterloo, Ontario: North Waterloo Academic Press, 1987), pp. 23, 24, 104.
8. Karen Armstrong highlights trends found among Christians, Jews, and Moslems toward fundamentalism in *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).
9. James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 27, 28.
10. Arthur F. Holmes, *Building the Christian Academy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2001), pp. 4, 5.
11. Ellen White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 33.
12. _____, “Christ Our Hope,” *Review and Herald* (December 20, 1892).
13. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness. Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 111.
14. This idea was suggested by Cesar Gonzalez who works with Jose Rojas in the North American Division in placing volunteers into various work opportunities.
15. Donald Kennedy, *Academic Duty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22.
16. These themes were explored in Richard Osborn, “The Role of the Seventh-day Adventist College in the Pursuit of Truth,” Presentation to Triennial Meeting of the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians, Portland, Oregon (April 11, 1998); “The Pursuit of Truth and Faith in Adventist Higher Education,” Worship, Conference on Science and Faith Symposia and Workshops for Higher Education, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich. (July 24, 1998); and “A Parent’s Quest,” *Adventist Review* (November 1999), pp. 8-11.