



Shawna Vyhmeister

## A Call to Nurture Resilient Faith in

# ADVENTIST EDUCATION

**A**dventist students are growing up in a world that is increasingly hostile to Christian beliefs. Globally, many Adventist young adults attend public schools and universities, and the philosophical ideologies undergirding these institutions, while varying based on the social and economic cultures within the given country, are likely to be very different from traditional Adventist perspectives. Students' religious experiences and levels of commitment to any particular religion will vary depending on, among other variables, how actively engaged their parents chose to be during their formative years.<sup>1</sup> Factors like these have an impact on how students function and influence their individual values. Yet, regardless of the cultural orientation within a country or what took place in the students' homes, Adventist educators and education professionals must prepare students to face a secular world that is increasingly and openly hostile to Christianity. Our Adventist schools must address how we prepare students to face this secular world independently after they graduate. If we do not, who will? This article first documents the depths of the problem and then lays out some of the things that Adventist educators can do about it.

### Societal Pressure Against Traditional Christian Beliefs

Demographic shifts have brought changes to traditionally Christian nations like the United States. As the national population became more diverse, specifically in religion, the demand to provide non-sectarian public spaces rose to the level of the courts. Constitutional

clauses guaranteeing religious freedom, free expression, and free speech curtailed practices like public prayer or displaying the Ten Commandments in government buildings, and supported religious freedom through the separation of church and state.<sup>2</sup> As DeJong explains, it used to be that "church and culture seemed to pursue the same goals, hold the same values, even (dare I say) serve the same Lord."<sup>3</sup> However, he observes that "in the second half of the twentieth century, we have seen a distinct change in the American environment," which shows it is moving away from Christian values. He suggests that we can no longer count on society to urge our children along the path toward Christianity.<sup>4</sup> This move toward secularism and the growth of non-Christian religions is not limited to the United States. Other societies (e.g., countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa) have experienced or are experiencing this cultural shift, which has been accompanied by an increase in religious persecution.

In the past, if people didn't like what was being said at an event, they left. Today, there is a high chance that someone will attempt to shut down the event or disrupt it. If a public figure is caught voicing a perspective that is not in line with the company's or society's beliefs, they may be fired: "What they've been told is pretty clear: you're welcome to have opinions, but they [had] better be the same as ours."<sup>5</sup> In Western nations, more liberal perspectives seem to be acceptable, but not more conservative ones. If this is religious freedom, it seems to be freedom *from* religion, not freedom of conscience or freedom to practice one's religion openly. American children are

growing up in a “Christian” country where they are more likely to be endangered for believing in God than for doubting. Was it accidental when the Columbine shooters asked their victims if they believed in God and then pulled the trigger when they said “yes”?<sup>6</sup> Or when those attending Bible study at Charleston, South Carolina’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church were murdered by an attacker who entered the meeting under the guise of needing prayer?<sup>7</sup>

More sobering data regarding religious persecution nationwide comes from the Voice of America, a global media government agency, which reports that “since the mid-2000s, mass shootings in churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques have become more frequent, and been committed by perpetrators with a history of racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Christianity and Islamophobia, with ties to white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups.”<sup>8</sup> The report continues to note that in 1966-2000, 1 percent of mass shootings were deemed motivated by religious hate; from 2000-2014, 9 percent; and, from 2018-2020, 17 percent. This once-Christian nation is fast becoming not only non-Christian, but one that is distinctly unfriendly to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and many other groups. And, these numbers do not begin to compare with levels of religious persecution globally.<sup>9</sup>

But the most insidious attack against Christian beliefs and values may be from academia, long a bastion of left-leaning perspectives. Richard Rorty may be an extremist among left-leaning proponents, but his viewpoint is not his alone. Here is his explanation of his goals as a university professor:

“The fundamentalist parents of our fundamentalist students think that the entire ‘American liberal establishment’ is engaged in a conspiracy. The parents have a point . . . we are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours.”<sup>10</sup>

These words are not an academic discussion of a point of view. They are a declaration of war. And not only is the approach calculated and deliberate: it is effective. The results are devastating: “When it comes to reshaping values, liberal universities know precisely what they’re doing. And the reality is that about four out of five students walk away from their Christian faith by the time they are in their twenties.”<sup>11</sup>

### By the Numbers

This rather grim picture of the increasingly secular world in which young adults are growing up is only part of the picture. We turn now to look at the data. How

have these changes affected the youth? Here is what we know:

These numbers show that the “no religious affiliation” group has tripled recently.<sup>12</sup> We do see, however, that a third of young adults attend church weekly, and a quarter of them become Christians as adults. Findings also show



that 70 percent of Christian students who attend a secular university will, as Rorty urged, decide to leave their faith behind. However, it is important to note that many young adults who quit attending church don’t stop because they disagree with the beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Only 10 percent become atheists or don’t want to be seen as a Christian anymore. Some feel judged by other church members, while others disagree with certain beliefs. Most do not.<sup>14</sup> They just slip away. And while a few of those who drop out will eventually return, sadly, most will not.

### What to Do?

So, what can Christian teachers do in the face of this exodus? Is there any good news or a silver lining somewhere? Fortunately, there is. As the world has become less friendly to Christian values and behav-

**83%** American students who attend secular universities.<sup>15</sup>

**71%** Americans who claim to be Christian.<sup>16</sup>

**70%** Professed Christians who leave university with little or no faith.<sup>17</sup>

**64-80%** Young adults reared in the church who will be disengaged from religion by the age of 29.<sup>18</sup>

**69%** Young adults who never return to church if they drop out for a year or more.<sup>19</sup>

**60%** Young adults who were spiritually active in their teens but are not active now.<sup>20</sup>

**33%** Young adults (18-29) who attend church weekly.<sup>21</sup>

**31%** University students who claimed no religious affiliation in 2016.<sup>22</sup>

**23%** Born-again Christians who embraced Christ after their 21st birthday.<sup>23</sup>

**10%** University students who claimed no religious affiliation in 1986.<sup>24</sup>

**10%** Young adults who attend a religious meeting weekly other than church.<sup>25</sup>

**Note:** Because these statistics came from different sources and were collected at different times, they do not add up to 100 percent. All of the studies cited were conducted in the United States.

ior, many individuals and organizations have begun to study what works and do something about it. Three areas have been proven to make a difference in young Christian students' lives. Adventist educators are already participants in the first of these areas but should prayerfully consider whether they can do more.

### Promote Adventist Education

One of the most effective tools for maintaining faith in today's world is not a surprise: It is participation in

Adventist education. Although many of these studies are not recent and more research needs to be done, what we know is shown in the chart on the left.

When asked, the students reported that "the most important factor that . . . helped them develop their religious faith" was attending an Adventist school.<sup>26</sup> It is as simple as that, but there is more. The statistics say the same thing. "There is a consistent and important relationship between attending an Adventist school and the likelihood that a child or youth will join the Adventist Church and then choose to remain a member."<sup>27</sup> Simply put, more people who attended Adventist schools as children stay in the church as adults. In one study that followed Adventist young people over 10 years, the results were notable: "At the 10-year mark, the probability of leaving the Adventist Church was 3.9 times greater for those who had attended non-Adventist schools than those who had attended Seventh-day Adventist schools."<sup>28</sup>

Looking at the phenomenon in another way, "Thirteen years after graduation, 37 percent of those who had graduated from public high schools remained in the church, compared with 77 percent of those who had graduated from Adventist academies."<sup>29</sup> The 37 percent number lines up with what other Christian denominations are reporting. The 77 percent who remain is quite a bit better.

Of course, there is no guarantee. Adventist schools are not perfect and will not "make" all their students become Christians. Adventist educators already believe that our children deserve the best opportunity we can give them to grow up into adults who have an active and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. The Bible reminds us that even sinful humans would not give their children a stone when they ask for bread (Matthew 7:9-11). These data and results should be shared often with parents in churches and homes, and most importantly, with constituents in general. Many who may not have school-aged children can help promote Adventist education and support, financially or otherwise, those who do. Preach it from the pulpit—education sermons, talks, spotlights. Talk about it during home visits with families. Actively and intentionally share the knowledge that Adventist education makes a difference.

### Prepare Young People to Face a Secular World

Getting students in the school's front door is a good first step, but what happens while they are in school is important. Soon, they will face increased exposure to secular society and need to be ready.

Most students don't intend to leave their faith when they leave home, but many wind up doing pre-

cisely that.<sup>30</sup> Leaving home is often enough to make the break with religion: Attending a public university adds more pressure, as Christian beliefs will be questioned, even assaulted, from day one.<sup>31</sup> Students will make friends with many non-Christians, and before they know it, they might begin to change. One woman who rediscovered her faith later in life explained how this happened to her in college: “Originally, I hoped to share my faith with them, but instead, they passed on their spiritual indifference to me. They had a subtle but profound influence on my priorities.”<sup>32</sup>

This pressure toward secularization is not new. One author explains that while young people may “receive some measure of religious instruction at home, eventually, they leave home, and launch out into the world. Some go to work; some go to college. They face temptations that they have not faced before and give in to them. Their lives might get out of control with the use of alcohol, and they might give in to sexual indulgence. At the least, they never read the Bible or make any attempt to develop a spiritual life. Most don’t even attempt to take what knowledge is at their disposal and form their own beliefs and convictions. They don’t learn to think.”<sup>33</sup>

This situation may sound much like what many Christian youth experience today. But the truth is, this was written in 1797. This problem is not new, but if anything, it is getting worse. We must find a way of giving our students the tools they need to support, defend, and grow their faith. Equipping our students must be a primary goal of Adventist education, and it cannot wait until high school or beyond. Yet, it is not enough to equip students. We must also provide parents with opportunities to learn about the principles that guide Adventist education, through seminars, after-school extracurricular events, publications, and other sources.

The world is not a friendly place for young Christians. Not only are the statistics alarming; the scoffers are equally blatant with their criticism: “If four years of college undo 18 years of parenting and religious affiliation, perhaps the faith community’s tenuous hold

is the problem, not the particular place outside its bubble where that hold evaporates.”<sup>34</sup> This statement will raise hackles, but it also points to a truth. If we cannot or do not prepare young people to follow God during the first 18 years, maybe part of the problem *is* ours. We have not prepared our young people to swim against the current of society; to answer tough questions; or to thrive spiritually in a secular world.

It seems that while attending secular universities is part of the problem, it is not the cause of the departure from the churches. Plenty of people who don’t go to college also leave the church. Simply put, today’s

world is not an environment that encourages faith in Christianity. And this means that we may need to prepare our young people differently if we want to keep them.

We often make choices for our students and then wonder why they don’t know how to choose for themselves. We must help them learn to make good choices and let them practice under supervision. We try to create a world without opportunities to sin, so they won’t be tempted. Maybe we should focus more on helping them learn to resist temptation. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in teaching them the truth that we fail to address their questions and concerns.

What if we actively prepared our young people for the secular world while they study in our Adventist schools? What if we talked with them before they leave to help them understand what is likely to happen there, in terms of their spirituality, temptations, and the closed-minded individuals or extreme activists they will surely meet? What if we gave them ideas from our own lives on how to travel north in a south-moving world?

### Support Christian Fellowship Groups in Colleges

The natural outgrowth of preparing youth for the secular world is following up with them when they get there. This approach has not been a focus for Adventist schools and teachers, as we have thrown our energy into trying to keep students in our schools. But what happens after they leave, when their support system is gone? Is there something we can still do?

Given that universities are places where young

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Christians can be drawn away from their faith, we need to act to provide support. “There’s no such thing as a solitary Christian,” Budziszewski argues. “If you go into the world alone, you’ll be swallowed.”<sup>35</sup> Many Christian groups have realized this problem. They are beginning to work together to actively reach out on secular campuses, providing virtual and physical communities that make contact even before prospective college students leave home.<sup>36</sup>

Public universities have a wide variety of special-interest clubs, and there are Christian groups (e.g., Campus for Christ) who have operated on public campuses for years, allowing those who desire it to have a Christian influence and a nurturing environment for their faith. Some of these groups have been questioned and even pushed off-campus. But, overall, researchers have concluded that God and faith are more present in today’s public high schools than in the past.<sup>37</sup> And at the university level, Christian groups in the U.S. are beginning to insist on their constitutional rights of freedom of association, freedom of speech, and equal access to campus facilities and resources. It turns out that the idea of separation of church and state “requires neutrality toward religion; it does not require hostility.”<sup>38</sup>

Christian college fellowship groups are an area that Adventists need to emphasize more, especially given the large percentage of Adventist students in secular universities. An organization that works to do this is Adventist Ministry to College and University Students (AMiCUS).<sup>39</sup> They publish a journal (*College and University Dialogue*)<sup>40</sup> aimed at Adventist students in non-Adventist universities. In some parts of the world, there is a strong emphasis and impact; in others, this sort of ministry is reaching just a small percentage of the Adventist students in public universities.

But this is not something that needs to wait for church administrators to set up. Is there a college near you? What can you, as an Adventist educator, or your local church do to provide a safe, friendly environment for religious seekers, whether Adventist or not? Are there Adventist students who would appreciate a ride to church? A home-cooked meal? A place to hang out on Sabbath? A campus-based Bible study group? Are there graduates from your school that you can contact and offer support? This outreach can be scaled large or small but doing something is certainly better than doing nothing.

Preparation for leaving home matters. But support is indispensable. What if Adventist schools kept communication open with young people after they have left the school? Perhaps they can help them find a friendly family in the new church, send e-mails to stay

in touch, or even send care packages on a regular basis. The school might even help find people in the home church who could offer to discuss challenging questions that a student will surely encounter in the university and to dialogue in an open-minded way. The possibilities are as limitless as the needs, but it starts with people willing to serve and caring enough about the young people to develop a relationship with them. If we shut ourselves out of our young people’s lives when they need guidance the most, we should not be surprised if they seek help elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

As Christian educators, our goal is to nurture young adults to become well-grounded in their faith and broad-minded “thinkers, not mere reflectors of other people’s thought.”<sup>42</sup> Not closed-minded liberals or conservatives, but open-minded Christians who understand the secular perspective and are not afraid to stand up for the truth as presented in God’s Word—spiritually resilient adults who are in the world but have not absorbed its ethos.

It is not easy for a young person to grow up Christian today. But rather than wringing our hands and weeping about the devil’s success with our young people, what if we put the devil on notice that each one of them is a child of God, and he/she is not going to be sent out unprepared, or left unguarded, or unprotected? We need to consider what things we can intentionally do to make a difference to the Christian youth we have in our sphere of influence. A home-cooked meal. A call or a message. A conversation and a prayer on the sidewalk. A thought-provoking assignment that helps them grow spiritually. They need to know they are not alone. God is not dead, and faith is still relevant. Who knows? Your small act could make a difference for eternity. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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**Recommended citation:**

**Shawna Vyhmeister**, “A Call to Nurture Resilient Faith in Adventist Education,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 84:4 (2022): 23-29.

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