
Where Have All The Flowers Gone? Adventists in Non-Adventist Colleges

by Dolores Kennedy Londis

We gathered one evening in my living room to talk about life at non-Adventist colleges and universities. All the students had strong Adventist roots (three were from denominational employees' families). All attended Seventh-day Adventist schools through academy. Now all were away living in dormitories or apartments at non-Adventist universities. Three of the students were undergraduates; two of them in graduate programs.

Among the undergraduates, effervescent, sparkling Tonya spoke with the most intensity. She was exhilarated by the variety of her options at the state university she attends. Her blond hair bobbing, she responded quickly in conversation.

Linda, the youngest of the group, stated her opinions candidly and honestly. Her crossed leg, which bounced all evening, increased in tempo whenever she entered the discussion. Her excitement at being an undergraduate challenged by an academically demanding university could hardly be contained.

Although Robert spoke softly he was alert and articulate. He was still an undergraduate, but previous education in Europe and world travel had already given him a cosmopolitan approach to issues.

The two graduate students—John and Polly—spoke with the confidence that comes with having survived the fray of undergraduate life and the prospect of settling into careers. Through the evening John sat back in his chair, smiling appreciatively as the undergraduates volunteered their feelings. He had been where they now were and understood exactly what they were experiencing. He filled the role of sage.

Ever since academy Polly had juggled lots of activity, and kept everything under control. She was still juggling (writing a Master's thesis, job hunting for the first time, working for a temporary agency), but the night's activity seemed important to her. As she sat pensively on the couch twisting the curls of her black hair, she was eager to talk about her experiences in two large, prestigious universities.

We began the evening by exploring why the students chose to attend a non-Adventist school. Tonya, the irrepressible undergraduate, sprang forward, tossed her blond hair back from her face and tumbled out an answer,

"Expense," she said simply. "I was working 35 hours a week, taking 17 hours. I was a sophomore in college and I was burned out. I wasn't enjoying life."

John, the graduate-student sage, added: "Non-Adventist colleges made a bigger deal of trying to get me to go there. I felt in some ways slighted—perhaps that's too big a word to use—but I felt there were a lot of very good non-Adventist colleges saying, 'Hey, you're important to us, your

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decision about where you go is important to us.' I felt Adventist colleges didn't care where I went. I felt, during my junior and senior years, that I might go into the ministry, but there was no real push for me to make that decision because none of the people in the Adventist college system seemed geared to that kind of recruiting. As a result, I had more exposure to opportunities available to me at non-Adventist colleges."

"The only Adventist college that I was particularly interested in at the time was Newbold in England," said Polly, looking back from the perspective of an undergraduate student. "But a friend of mine, during my senior year, encouraged me to apply to some big-name universities because he felt it would be good for me, that I could handle it and I owed it to myself to try. He said that I was selling myself short if I didn't. So, half-heartedly, I applied late never thinking that I would get in. I sort of said, 'Well, God, if I am accepted that must mean you want me there, because there's no other way that I'll get there.' So when I got in, that was it."

Robert, the cosmopolitan undergraduate, spoke quietly about purely academic reasons. "I was told when I was in the eighth grade that when I went to academy, I would have to work like I'd never worked before. I'd be up all night. Well, I got to academy and I didn't have to stay up all night. By the time I reached my senior year, they were starting to say this again. This time I thought, It's a lie. They told me this a few years ago. Now I wanted to be in a place where I would be pushed and challenged."

Linda, her leg bouncing, wanted to find out whether she could meet the greater challenge she perceived awaiting her on a non-Adventist campus.

"I decided to apply to non-Adventist colleges because I wanted to know if I could get in and if I could handle myself. I was curious. I knew what going to an Adventist college would be like, but I wasn't sure about a non-Adventist college. I also wanted to make it easier on myself when I applied to graduate schools. Coming from a non-Adventist college they would know I had a good background. There was no challenge getting into an Adventist college. I could go where I wanted.

"Because everything is so easy in the Adventist system, you tend to think that the real world is outside the system. I know the philosophy is that every Adventist is entitled to an Adventist education, and I think that's true, but there should be competitiveness within the church system. We should have schools that range from your community-college level to the Harvard-level colleges that will also attract the most motivated students."

Robert agreed: "I had no doubt that I could make it well in an Adventist college, but I wasn't sure about a non-Adventist college, and I needed to know that."

All said that until their senior year in academy they had intended to go to an Adventist college. Another option had not even been considered. What happened to them during their senior year obviously changed their decision. As John made clear, one major factor was the contrast between the seeming lack of interest in them from Adventist colleges and the aggressive marketing they experienced from secular institutions. Another factor was their growing curiosity about whether they were good enough to be accepted by a college with a selective admissions policy and be able to hold their own against intellectual peers.

We proceeded through the evening asking how they related their Adventist experience to their new academic environment.

Educating for the Church or for Life?

How did your Adventist education prepare you for the colleges you attend?

Responses to this question lasted half the evening. The students felt deeply that changes must be made in the academy Bible curriculum.

John: "In areas like English composition, my background could have been stronger. I don't think there were enough rigorous writing requirements imposed on students. Perhaps it shouldn't have been imposed on everybody, but it should

have been there for students who were going to college, where they'd be required to do significant amounts of writing."

Tonya: "I feel it was really lacking in the humanities. I now sit in college classes with students who have had three years of languages, philosophy, et cetera."

John: "I felt the school was really deficient in the religion/Bible courses. I look back now and think that the treatment of the subject was much too superficial. That's really a danger, because the school isn't sure how many of these students will ever have Bible again. I think it's important when you have impressionable teenagers that you not just skim the surface of religion but say, 'Let's examine this stuff critically. Let the critical examination that's going to go on the rest of your life start here.' I didn't have that sense from my Bible classes."

Linda: "I graduated from academy getting A's in all my religion classes, and largely mastered a bunch of stories. When I got to college, I discovered that some of my friends who had gone to public schools knew a lot more about the Bible than I did. They had done things like join Bible study groups in which they really studied Scripture. In academy, we had a book that contained a text or two, but we never read the Bible. It always felt like grade school to me. When I got to college, I discovered that religion was one of the biggest majors on the campus. People were excited about religion courses and loved taking them because they were so interesting."

Polly: "You know, if there was anything I felt smug about when I went into the non-Adventist setting, it was my knowledge of the Bible. After all, I had been raised by Adventist parents who took me to church every week. I had been in Adventist schools for 12 years. I had no qualms about my knowledge of the Bible. I joined one of the Christian groups on campus that met each Friday night for Bible study and fellowship. I was shocked to discover that I really knew very little about the Bible. I understood the rules and regulations and doctrines—that I shouldn't eat meat, drink alcohol, or wear jewelry—but I could not defend any of them from the Bible."

Polly went on to say that she had visited her

pastor, talked a lot by phone with her parents and teachers, but still struggled in vain to find persuasive answers. Her non-Adventist friends were pushing her in ways she had never been pushed, and she was astonished that students who had never been to religious schools could seem to know so much more about Scripture than she did.

Her first reaction to this experience, she told us, was anger. She felt almost betrayed by the school system that professed to be unique because of its emphasis on religion and yet could leave her comparatively ignorant about the Bible itself.

Choosing a Life-style to Fit One's Faith

What about an Adventist life-style and job?

I raised the questions about dating on non-Adventist campuses, the temptations to drink and experiment with drugs. Space does not permit quoting each student, but their answers may be summarized in the following way: "Marriage is not even on our minds; the average age for marriage is 26 for men and 25 for women." The women agreed they were going to complete their education before thinking seriously about matrimony. This means (and they realize it) that they may not even meet their future spouses until they are out in the work world.

On drinking and drugs, they quickly assured me that the issue is a problem on every campus, including Adventist ones. Those who are going to do it will do it anywhere. The specific campus environment would not be the decisive factor.

Toward the end of our discussion, I asked if any of them would consider working for the church. With the exception of Polly, they all said "no." With a public-health degree, Polly feels she might seek church employment someday because she believes she is in the one area where the church is doing some good things.

The others felt it would be too restrictive for them. They want to be involved in bigger causes and work for a greater number of people. The youngest student, Robert, summed it up this way:

“I’ve thought about this for a long time, and the question I finally decided I had to answer was this: Do I want to spend the rest of my life working to change an institution, or do I want to spend the rest of my life working to change the world? The answer to me is very clear.”

The Way We Were

What do you miss about not attending an Adventist college?

Robert: “I have friends at Adventist colleges who have time to play tennis, swim, et cetera. By my choice, I don’t have enough balance to my life. The pressure of my academic program does not allow enough time for some of the other things.”

Polly: “I really miss the drama and choir groups, the things they would do on the weekends with faculty members. I found myself remembering how much fun it was to get to know your teachers, go over to their houses or whatever. I remember thinking I was missing out on that. I never get to the point of wanting to leave my non-Adventist college, but I did really miss that community or family environment.”

Linda: “The thing that I miss about an Adventist college is being able to keep the Sabbath. I miss that a lot. When you’re in a non-Adventist college, in the dormitory, if you want to keep the Sabbath, you do it by yourself. My sophomore year, two other Adventists arrived on campus, so it was better. But it can be a real lonely time. The Sabbath certainly means more when you can share it with others.”

I Wouldn’t Change a Thing

If you were deciding today where you would attend college, would you decide differently?

Polly: “No. I would still choose to go where I am, and it has to do with God and what I learned and how I grew as a

Christian. It doesn’t have to do with academics. Even if I knew that the academics were equal, I would still choose the non-Adventist college because I grew there as a Christian. I was challenged to know my God more personally than at any other time in my life. Maybe it would have happened in an Adventist college, but I think the interaction I had in the Christian fellowship groups far surpassed the challenge to grow I would have gotten anywhere else. I learned so much about God and about myself in these groups. I don’t think it would have happened without the stimulation of other Christians. In the many Adventist things I had done in academy—Bible conferences and so on—there wasn’t the emphasis on what it means to have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ; and there wasn’t as much discussion about personal prayer, personal Bible study, or growing in a relationship. It was more about belonging to the church and doing the things you’re supposed to do, such as reading the Bible and attending the weeks of prayer. The emphasis was, ‘Have you studied your Sabbath school lesson seven times this week or read the morning watch for the day?’ It should have been, ‘Have you spent some time with God today, have you learned something new in your relationship with God? What’s God teaching you, how have you grown?’ I was challenged in that way, held accountable by my fellow Christians, challenged to know what I believed.”

Tonya: “I’ve had a greater appreciation for my religion just because I got outside the shelter. I got away from the protection, and the things that I always took for granted I began to look at more carefully. I questioned, ‘Why do I do this?’ I am the kind of person who has to have both sides of the picture. For example, now that I have studied evolution I can appreciate their point of view, but also understand more fully why I believe what I do. Some of the questions have been resolved, some haven’t; but the religion and why I believe it have become more important to me.”

Polly: “I may not be termed a ‘good Adventist’ by a lot of people, but I feel I’m a much stronger Christian than I’ve ever been before.”

Robert: “I’ve worked with other Christians on several projects and, at this point, I can say that I

defend Christianity, but I'm not sure I can defend Adventism, because I find a lot of the 'package' of Adventism rubbish. It has nothing to do with knowing Christ. That's part of my problem and I'm working on that."

When I asked how many of them went to church on a regular basis, all but one responded positively. One student went to the local Adventist church for the warmth of community, not because there was good preaching or teaching, and then went to the non-Adventist church on Sunday with her other friends. There she got strong preaching and enjoyed it very much; so, between the two church services she felt she got it all.

What Do We Learn From These Students?

As the conversation progressed it became increasingly clear that the two younger students—Robert and Linda—had not yet come to a conclusion regarding their commitment to Adventism. They were still struggling with a variety of issues and were not sure where they would come out. Uncertain about the denomination's real priorities, they nevertheless cling to a basic "core" of Adventism.

The three older students, Polly, John, and Tonya, had arrived at a much more comfortable relationship with their Adventism. They had worked through the issues and had come out feeling that there were important things about the faith they could hold on to (for example, the Sabbath and the health emphasis), while there were other issues they had to let go for lack of proof. They were not only comfortable in what they regarded as their "mature" Adventist faith,

they also believed their non-Adventist college experience made that more mature faith possible.

For me, there were two surprising outcomes of this meeting—one specific, the other general. The specific point that emerged was the consensus of the students that their Bible classes were more sociology than religion. Each of the students told stories of feeling inadequate to either articulate why they were Adventists or to defend Adventist positions from the Bible. While some of their Bible courses were good, they should not have been billed as "Bible." The students all felt cheated in this respect. Their question seemed to be, "If this is Adventist education's *raison d'être* and it is failing in this critical area, what is Seventh-day Adventist education accomplishing?"

The more general impression that I gathered was the sense on the part of the students that their own Christian commitment had been deepened on a non-Adventist campus. While they were frustrated by what they saw as irrational and superficial emphases in the church, instead of giving up on religion altogether, they seemed to yearn for something more deeply spiritual.

Our talking lasted for hours. The students had been eager to express their own concerns and to hear what the others would say about their experiences. Naturally, I was saddened to hear them cite the reasons they did not choose an Adventist education, but happy they still cared about the church.

I am convinced that these young people love the church they censure, because they do it in the name of strengthening the church. Speaking honestly is their ultimate act of respect. Those who criticize us in love always teach us infinitely more than those who love us without criticism. The leadership can best return that respect by taking students as seriously as they take the church.