

Missional Educational Leadership in

URBAN SETTINGS



Authentic Christian education must be redemptive and transformative, seeking to restore the image of God in every student. My favorite definition of leadership comes from Jesus, who said, “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*” (NRSV).¹ “*Let*” means we make a conscious decision. “*Your light*” is the influence we exert for kingdom purposes. “*Shine before others*” indicates the arena of our witness. This mandate applies to the Seventh-day Adventist educator, whether a teacher

or administrator. Missional educational leadership recognizes the transformative power of committing to personal engagement with students and continuing improvement as professionals. These twin commitments are anchored in the Matthew 5:16 command.

A missional approach to education is by its very nature *spiritual*. Educators do not effectively influence students by inundation or indoctrination. Instead, missional spirituality, within the context of Christian education, implies devotion driven by a biblical call to address the general and specific challenges in students’ lives. This approach to educational leadership must be contextualized to the environment,

whether urban or rural. With God’s blessing, missional educational leadership within the context of urban living and specifically, the education of urban students, produces transformed lives.

The duty of the Christian educator is to facilitate the restoration of God’s image and character in students’ thoughts and actions. The first great commandment given by Christ—loving God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind—displaces love for the worldly and prepares the Christian for eternal life eternal (1 John 2:15-17). The intellect of the missional educator

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is developed through vigorous exercise of mental processes, purposeful and diligent application, and sustained action. Missional spirituality and leadership seek to disciple both the heart and the mind while delivering learning rooted in biblical spirituality.² The work of Christian education is to develop biblically grounded, intellectually vigorous, and thoughtful students whose characters reflect that transformational learning has taken place.

The Urban Educational Context

Urban schools and communities struggle to deliver education within environments that frequently are plagued by poverty, dysfunctional families, homelessness, malnutrition, teen pregnancy, mental-health issues, illicit drugs, street violence, and underpaid, burned-out teachers³—many of whom are inexperienced and/or poorly prepared to serve in urban settings.⁴ These documented social factors and conditions can seriously disrupt the learning process.

With urbanization being the defining phenomenon of the 21st century,⁵ schools worldwide must now address what was previously the domain of elected officials. Poverty has become urbanized as students in cities disproportionately continue to fall behind in educational outcomes compared to the growth in academic achievement by students in suburban areas, with the undereducated facing increasingly dire prospects in the job market.

Despite the severity of these challenges, the Adventist Church has a wonderful opportunity to impact urban students with transformative Christian education.

In 2014, urban areas accounted for 54 percent of the total global population, up from 34 percent in 1960. Ninety percent of urban population growth, in absolute numbers, is concentrated in less-developed regions. It is estimated that by 2017, the majority of people will be living in urban areas.⁶ According to the World Bank,

throughout all developing regions, except Europe and Central Asia, urban poverty is growing, with 70 to 75 percent of urban residents in Africa and South Asia categorized as poor. In Latin America, more than half of the poor (totaling more than one billion people) live in urban areas, which continue to expand.⁷

An array of challenges and opportunities face educators in urban centers. Therefore, public and private education providers must rethink how education is delivered in urban environments to students at all levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Tokyo, Japan	(37,126,000)
Jakarta, Indonesia	(26,063,000)
Seoul, South Korea	(22,547,000)
Delhi, India	(22,242,000)
Shanghai, China	(20,860,000)
Manila, Philippines	(20,767,000)
Karachi, Pakistan	(20,711,000)
New York, U.S.A.	(20,464,000)
Sao Paulo, Brazil	(20,186,000)
Mexico City, Mexico	(19,463,000)

Missional Educational Leadership

Missional education seeks to transform the lives of individuals and communities. In 2014, the global Seventh-day Adventist educational system included 7,946 schools, colleges, and universities, with 96,388 teachers and 1,942,828 students.⁹ The system functions amidst parochial schools, public schools, and the burgeoning for-profit private-school industry, which currently implements a business model for schools that focuses on career/job preparation and profits, to the neglect of character development. The absence of character development within the

curriculum of these schools provides the Adventist Church with an opportunity to provide missional education targeted to the personal and societal challenges faced by students living in urban centers. Rather than simply communicating book knowledge, Adventist educators can cultivate character and intellectual resiliency in their students. They can challenge students to contemplate their surroundings and propose possible solutions to challenges. Students will be equipped to implement God-honoring and creative solutions to the problems faced by their communities.

Transformative Education

Mrs. White appeared to chastise the missional priorities of her day when she wrote: *“There is means now tied up that should be in use for the unworked cities in Europe, Australia, and America, and in the regions beyond. These cities have been neglected for years. The angels of God are waiting for us to give our labors for their inhabitants. From town to town, from city to city, from country to country, the warning message is to be proclaimed, not with outward display, but in the power of the Spirit, by men of faith.”*¹⁰ Adventist education, then, is transformative. While urban centers were obviously fewer (and smaller) in the 19th century, compared to the 21st century, Ellen G. White observed their dire conditions:

“When I think of the cities in which so little has been done, in which there are so many thousands to be warned of the soon coming of the Saviour, I feel an intensity of desire to see men and women going forth to the work in the power of the Spirit, filled with Christ’s love for perishing souls. . . . We all need to be wide awake, that, as the way opens, we may advance the work in the large cities.”¹¹

Mrs. White also emphasized education’s role in transforming lives through service in this life and the life to come. She believed that teachers should hold high expectations for students and provide more than the

technical instruction needed to acquire a job.¹² Character development will inspire students with “principles of truth, obedience, honor, integrity, and purity—principles that will make them a positive force for the stability and uplifting of society. He [God] desires them, above all else, to learn life’s great lesson of unselfish service.”¹³ So, for example, to the college student, “we offer education not simply across four years, but an education that will make a difference across their next forty years and their next 4,000 years.”¹⁴

Missional educational leadership, then, creates the environment for transformative education. Imagine if business and economics professors taught their students how banking affects lives and communities. And, going beyond the theories, if they challenged their students to create and manage a bank, using the principles taught and incorporating biblical admonitions about the way Christians ought to relate to money. This would empower students to address problems in their communities and participate in finding practical ways to improve their quality of life.

A Personal Story

I will never forget Jason and Conrad,¹⁵ two of my academically outstanding college students. When I met them on the first day of class, I could tell—from their detached, “cool at all cost,” attitude, fluency in urban jargon, and clothing—that they had grown up in tough urban environments. Considering their fashion awareness, they could easily have been students in Jakarta, Jamaica, London, Manila, New York, or Tokyo. But I could also see that they wanted something more. After all, here they were, sitting in my business management class—their textbooks open and their eyes straight ahead. I wanted to get to know them, to connect, to learn their stories. In the classroom, I was called to help them to persist to graduation and to under-

stand God’s purpose for their lives.

Conrad idolized his tough-talking, drug-running father who had been killed in a gang shootout. Jason told me about his preteen years, before his mother had been able to move to a better neighborhood and enroll him in a higher-quality school. Conrad hated gangs because of the emotional scars they created when the bullets came ripping through the walls of his home, so he wore certain colors to protect himself from the wrath of rival gangs.

Jason always remained vigilant while eating in the university cafeteria—never sitting with his back to the door. Over time, we developed a good relationship. I described what I saw, and Jason interpreted his behavior for me: “Doc, I guess I developed that in school. You would not know what it was like to eat in my school cafeteria or even at home. You see, at any time, gunfire could break out, and I would have to grab my food and run or drop under the table. And at home, it was the same thing, when the gangs were shooting, which was every week, you had to be ready to drop and hide. So, I hover over my food while on the lookout, but I don’t know anything else.”

I was amazed because those descriptions matched experiences shared by my military colleagues in active combat zones and my international friends in war-torn areas of the world. What I heard from Conrad and Jason seemed depressingly similar to stress disorders. Yet, learners with these types of problems often remain undiagnosed, lacking coping skills and are often relegated to classrooms where teachers stereotype inner-city or stressed-out students as non-learners. Both in and out of the classroom, I desperately sought ways to connect, to understand these two promising young men.

Four years later, imagine my joy and gratitude when, sitting with fellow faculty members, I heard Jason and Conrad cheered by a large crowd of family and friends as they marched

across the stage to receive their diplomas—the first in their families to earn college degrees. On that day, with tears in my eyes, I said to myself, “Thank you, God, for this calling to the ministry of teaching, and thank you for the gift of touching lives.” For Adventist education to be relevant and transformational for our students, we must seek to make practical applications that connect with their lives.

Practical Application Makes Education Relevant

So often, it is easy for teachers to use textbook curricula and examples rather than designing their own illustrations based on information and examples from contexts familiar to their students. But missional education is contextualized to ensure that students achieve mastery, understand the usefulness of the learning, and experience transformation in their own lives that they can share with their communities.

As teachers broadly apply these principles, “every study may become an aid in the solution of that greatest of all problems, the training of men and women for the best discharge of life’s responsibilities”¹⁶ whatever their calling—producing not just ministers of the gospel, but also ministers of medicine, teaching, research, and so on.

Developing Spirituality, Character, and Leadership

Whether educating urban students or equipping people to live and work in the cities, Adventist educators must be passionately committed to teaching, learning, and providing missional leadership. We must get to know each student in our classrooms, attempting to educate minds and hearts, not just lecture. We must understand the context of our students’ lives.

Missional leadership in education requires that we understand the issues

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and challenges that originate outside of school because they must be addressed before learning can commence. Employing research-based teaching methods and providing real-life applications will result in more effective learning. Missional leadership seeks to (1) understand the socio-economic conditions of students; (2) comprehend the attitudes and behaviors of students who are being disciplined; and (3) examine the lives and home environments of the learners in order to devise and implement effective

strategies to enhance their academic experiences.

Urban schools in high-poverty areas, like other educational settings, need redemptive education supported by transformative learning experiences intended to restore the image of God in students. Missionally minded educators are called to engage students, parents, and community members in a

shared commitment to change. This commitment requires five elements: vision, contextualized behaviors, empowerment of students and others, intentional transformation, and God-honoring commitment.

1. Visionary Leaders

Visionary, missional leaders are like Habakkuk,¹⁷ standing on the city wall, ready to receive the vision while looking toward God for direction. Like Joseph,¹⁸ they rely on God for wisdom to interpret and plan for the future. They maintain a vigilant outlook, examine the evidence, and safeguard the interests of their schools and communities.

A. *Watchtower Leadership*—Like Ezekiel and Nehemiah, watchtower leadership is positioned at the city wall, observing inside and outside the community. In the 21st century, watchtower educators envision a secure future and maintain that vision throughout day-to-day activities by studying and monitoring the health of the institution, by examining the individual and school-wide achievements of the students, and by recognizing the service contributions of graduates to the church and the world.

B. *Evidence-based Leadership*—Like Arioch in the Book of Daniel¹⁹ and the Moses-Jethro²⁰ team, evidence-based leadership collects evidence to examine the current state of affairs and the existing and desired capabilities. Missional education leadership must do the same, and then chart an evidence-based course of action.

C. *Engaged Leadership*—Like Nehemiah, engaged educational leaders realize that they cannot do it alone. Engaged leaders come close to students, parents, and community members, engaging them in problem-solving, vision casting, and implementing solutions. They build two-way connections with all critical stakeholders in order to collaboratively devise meaningful educational solutions.

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What a joy and extraordinary calling!



2. Contextualized Leadership

Contextualized leadership will seek strategies that are appropriate to solving specific educational problems in a given environment. These educational leaders do not simply apply pre-constructed strategies or transport curriculum and instructional approaches from one classroom to another, but carefully study the needs of the given environment and build the curriculum, select appropriate pedagogical tools, and employ other resources appropriate to the needs. The following leadership practices will effectively assist in defining the context for learning:

- *Appreciative Inquiry*—This approach employs the art and practice of asking questions to strengthen the school's teaching capacity because it leads educators to a deeper understanding, anticipatory thinking, and commitment to reinforcing behaviors that improve the school's potential. Missional educators identify individual and community needs and aspirations. Like Jesus, even if they know the answers, they ask questions to understand the perspectives of those they are called to serve, in order to appreciate differences in culture, language, and life experiences, and resist stereotyping, relying on "isms," pejorative behaviors, or subtle expressions of cultural arrogance. The appreciative approach to teaching, learning, and administering is a purposeful and solution-oriented way to approach community engagement. It respects the knowledge and experience of students, other educators, and the community. This evenhanded approach seeks to protect missional educators from their own implicit biases and prejudices, which otherwise can create difficulties, even when the leader is a member of the local community.

- *Reflective Leadership*—Effective educational leaders understand how to

best address the issues that challenge learning. Because they are reflective learners themselves, they know how to nurture the inventive abilities of students and the community as a whole. Jesus led the Samaritan woman to understand her situation and that of her community by guiding her into self-reflection. Reflective learning deepens awareness, which leads to transformation. This approach is illustrated well in the implementation of *service learning*. When meaningful community service is integrated with instruction and reflection, this enriches the learning experience, teaches civic responsibility, and strengthens communities.

3. Empowering Leaders

Like the apostle Paul, empowering educational leaders do not view themselves and their expertise as the solution; rather, they create solutions in and through others. They do the following:

- *Lead by Example*—living exemplary lives,²¹ engaging others, contextualizing decision-making, and employing character-grounded and mission-focused activities.²²

- *Empower Others*—helping others to learn to think and to do, to become

problem-solving educators and appreciative inquirers, both inside and outside the classroom.²³

4. Transformative Leaders

Transformative educational leaders use Jesus' life as a model in seeking to create learning environments that nurture God-honoring transformation of individuals, homes, and communities²⁴—sometimes one student, one classroom, or one school at a time. *Change* is their mantra as they endeavor to transform others to become people of character; inspire students and colleagues to embrace the school's mission to develop themselves and others; and empower others to learn through service to God and to their communities.

God-honoring Committed Leadership

Above all, the educator and leader commits to honoring God and holding an unwavering commitment to the Bible as the foundation for the curriculum, as well as the guide for all school activities, policies, and procedures.

For the missional educator, building learners' characters begins with an understanding of the purpose of education from a godly worldview and results in transformed attitudes and behaviors. In *Raise a Leader (God's Way)*, I argued first for values education that originates from the Bible, for parents to be the first and primary developers of character, but also for the home and school to partner in the development of character.²⁵ Missional educational leadership requires engagement with students, their families, and the community, but also necessitates a commitment to improvement. This type of leadership seeks to implement reforms that ensure sustainable and systematic improvements in educational processes and outcomes.

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God, our Creator. What a joy and extraordinary calling! ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Matthew 5:16, NRSV. Bible texts credited to NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), Chap. 1, p. 17.
3. From a speech by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's "Remarks at the National Urban League Centennial Conference." <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncan-remarks-national-urban-league-centennial-conference>. Accessed May 20, 2014.
4. For more information on the global education problem, please refer to this United Nations briefing paper: "Education for All," <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/efa/> and to the global monitoring report, "Education Counts: Towards the Millennium Development Goals" at UNESCO.org. Accessed May 3, 2015.
5. *WBI Urban: FY 10 Retrospective Review*, World Bank Institute: <http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/about/topics/urban>. Retrieved May 23, 2014.
6. World Health Organization (WHO): http://www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en. Accessed March 28, 2015.
7. *WorldAtlas*: <http://www.worldatlas.com/citypops.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2015.
8. See *WorldAtlas*, op. cit.
9. Quinquennial Reports from the divisions of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (2014).
10. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1946), p. 428. Italics supplied.
11. _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1902), vol. 7, p. 40.
12. _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), pp. 13-19.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 30.
14. Leslie Pollard, president of Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama, says when talking about the investment to gain a Seventh-day Adventist university education, "It is not just four years but 40 years and ultimately, 4,000 years [implying the commencement of eternity]."
15. This story highlights the conditions of urban students, the power of transformative engagement, and the leadership influence of Christian educators. The names and profiles are a composite of various students encountered and should not be construed as representing any individual student.
16. White, *Education*, op. cit., p. 239.
17. See Habakkuk 2:1.
18. See Genesis 40 and 41.
19. See Daniel 2.
20. See Exodus 18.
21. The example and recommendations of Jesus are recorded in Matthew 5, Luke 6, and John 13:12-15; and of His disciples, in Acts 5:41.
22. 2 Timothy 2 reminds missional educators of their calling to teach God's transformational lessons, to integrate biblical truths in the disciplines they teach.
23. The mandate is stated in *Education*, page 30 and is directly aligned with Paul's empowering counsel to young Timothy, recorded in 1 Timothy 4:12.
24. See Prudence Pollard, "Assessing Leader Effectiveness in a Diverse World," Chapter 13 in Leslie N. Pollard, ed., *Embracing Diversity: How to Understand and Reach People of All Cultures* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000).
25. Prudence LaBeach Pollard, *Raise a Leader (God's Way)* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2012).