

Gap year

Strengthening the bond between students and Christ

Millennials are leaving the church. Here's what a one-year Bible school, tucked away on a lake in Washington, is doing about it.

BY ALLISON HURTADO

Hidden among trees and small wooden cabins is Adelp~~h~~ia Bible School, a single, humble building proudly boasting the Adelp~~h~~ia logo. The one-year school is nestled on the shore of a lake so clear it is obvious nothing lurks at the bottom. A dock of colorful kayaks pops out against the magnificent mountain backdrop. The homes dotted around the lake belong in a Thomas Kinkade painting.



Adelp~~h~~ia is located at Converge Northwest's Lake Retreat, Ravensdale, Washington, steeped in a tradition of summer camps and ministry retreats. Many Adelp~~h~~ia students have legacies at the camp. Their parents went there for summer camps; they themselves were lifeguards. What was once a solution to the camp's financial challenges is now a gap-year program about to begin its fifth year.

Adelp~~h~~ia aims to equip millennials to grow deeper in their faith. The school originally opened in 1905, under the Baptist General Conference flagship. Dr. Emanuel Schmidt was the only teacher, instructing just five students. Adelp~~h~~ia was successful, but it closed in 1918 due to lack of finances during World War I. In fact, the library from the original school is now at Bethel University, in St. Paul, Minnesota. There is still a plaque at the original location, now part of Seattle University.

"Steve Welling and I were going through the Converge Northwest history book when we came to the section on Adelp~~h~~ia. We said to each other, 'Heck, let's revive it,'" Adelp~~h~~ia executive director Rob Neumann said. "And so we did."

Neumann brought Sean Post on board, who serves as the school's academic dean. He believes discipleship is the word to describe the program they created.



Can millennials' faith be preserved?

"A lot of people are frightened by the statistics regarding millennials leaving the church. There's a disconnect between the way we approach discipleship and how they perceive what it means to be a follower of Jesus," Post said. "Discipleship is getting lost in translation. But at Adelpia, we are giving people a real way to follow Jesus."

Reaching millennials has proved to be a difficult task for the church. Sixty percent of high school students walk away from their faith after they graduate. Even more students abandon their faith during college. Todd Arrambide, director of Adelpia recruitment, says most students don't know what to do after high school. Working with career and college-age students, Arrambide noticed many feel forced into a university.

"The goal of the one-year Adelpia program is to prepare students to go into whatever they do having experience in missional living and a biblical perspective," Arrambide said. "It's way more important to have a deep faith than a bunch of education and no faith. About 30 percent of Adelpia students go on to university."

Adelpia classes focus on what it means to live for Christ and in a community of believers. Arrambide teaches classes on the body, mind, soul and stewardship. Missions are a big part of the curriculum. A team goes into downtown Seattle every week to form relationships with the homeless. The students learn firsthand what it is to show people Christ.

Young people in the United States are expected to earn a bachelor's degree, even if they don't know the direction they want to go. Post notes that following the American dream dictates life a certain way, and discipleship and God don't compute. Neumann points out that gap-year (sometimes called link-year) programs between high school and college are common in Europe and Canada.

"Very few programs in the U.S. target students who are unsure of attending college," he said. "If you look around the world, we are the only country that doesn't have gap programs,

Karissa Daiber: 'No idea what I was going to do'

Karissa Daiber is just one of many students who wasn't sure what she would do after high school. She grew up in the church and even at Lake Retreat, spending summers there. Daiber enrolled in a local Christian university but didn't know what studies she was going to pursue. That's when she decided to check out Adelpia.

"I was still trying to figure out what I was going to do, and the idea of a one-year Bible school was not appealing to me at all," Daiber said. "Eventually God revealed to me my heart was in the wrong place and that I was going to college for the image and not for the right reasons."

Daiber was one of 20 Adelpia students in fall 2012: 10 men and 10 women. "Here [at Adelpia] I was able to focus on learning what it is to live for Christ in a community of believers and to go through all the ups and downs of that," Daiber said. "It was here I fully understood the depth of grace and how that impacts my view of myself and the grace I extend to others."

From disconnected faith to learning to live for Christ

Neumann points out the practical standpoint of Adelpia: it continues relationships year-round. The program itself was inspired by the ministry happening at Lake Retreat. The camp saw 60 to 70 students bond each summer. Most of the Converge Northwest pastors have a tie to Lake Retreat. It's a place believers get their first taste of ministry.

"We should take advantage of and strengthen these bonds," Neumann says. "I personally would love to see every district of Converge have a gap-year program. It builds up students instead of losing them as they go into college. The youth really need support."

Looking back at her decision, Daiber can't imagine it any other way. She admits that before attending Adelpia, she never saw herself working at a church. Now she's open to the idea. Before Adelpia, she had a relationship with God, but it lacked depth. She knew what evangelism was, but never practiced it.

"My relationship with God was something I had, but I wasn't doing the hard things and furthering my relationship with him," she said. "If challenges arose, I didn't know how to handle them. When I was in the Adelpia program, I had mentors and others who helped me. We faced problems together. If I had been at a public university, who knows what would've happened?"

Over the course of five years, Adelpia has reached 75 college students. Many go straight into ministry or, as Daiber will this fall, enroll at a community college to earn an associate degree. Daiber wants to help people.

Her advice to other youth: "If you know the direction you want to go, go for it. For me, that just wasn't the case. I was doing what other people wanted me to do as far as my education was concerned. Before going into debt, pray about your education. Be open to new ideas such as a one-year Bible school."

Allison Hurtado is a *Point* contributing editor. Story idea suggested by Rob Neumann of Converge Northwest.