

# *Towards Wholeness:*

## *The Special Character of Seventh-day Adventist Education*

To know, experience and share our hope  
in Jesus Christ  
through Adventist education

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# SECTION 1

## *Introduction*

Schools do not begin by accident. They are established for particular reasons, and the way they are organised and operated is an expression of the values and assumptions held by their sponsors and supporters. This is especially true of Seventh-day Adventist education.

Beginning a century and a half ago as a small home school in the United States of America, the Seventh-day Adventist School System is now the most extensive unified church-related educational network in the world operating in 145 countries with over 6,000 educational institutions, - primary, secondary and tertiary - with around 56,000 teachers and approximately 1.1 million students. In Australia, the K-12 Adventist School System comprises 60 schools and more than 12,000 students.

The heart and soul of this enterprise stems from a worldview regarding the origin, meaning, purpose, and destiny of human life. These beliefs and assumptions are drawn from the Bible. The writings of Ellen G White, a significant figure in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, are also acknowledged as an inspired commentary and guide in applying these understandings. The outcome of this effort gives Adventist education a special character that reflects the reasons, the vision, the aspirations and the values that are important to Adventist educators.

In this document, the term, "special character" is used to describe and explain SDA distinctiveness.

### *What is meant by the term, "special character"?*

"Special character" is the product of a number of interrelated components. It reflects:

- assumptions and beliefs which justify the existence and operation of the system
- a perception of the ultimate purpose of education
- understandings about the nature of knowledge
- beliefs about the nature of students
- beliefs about the role of the teacher
- understandings concerning the curriculum
- assumptions about teaching and learning
- perceptions of the ideal school environment

## *Why is a “Statement of Special Character” necessary?*

### *The Present Situation*

- The realisation that significant change has taken place in recent years in Adventist education.
- The reasons why Adventist schools exist, and what they are really trying to achieve is not always readily understood or appreciated.
- The attitudes and values of the changing makeup of clientele and new teaching staff have impacted on the collective understanding and potential operation of Adventist schools.
- Over time, some people associated with Adventist schools have begun to take them for granted, and their significance in the total ministry of the Church has been minimised or lost.

### *The Need*

- The special role of Adventist education in the total ministry of the church needs to be clarified and reaffirmed.
- Adventist educators need to recognise their accountability for what they represent, and what can be expected from them.
- A statement is needed as a systematic, comprehensive frame of reference to identify and express the special character of Adventist education in terms that can be shared and understood by others, recognising that we ourselves need to understand before we can help others to share our understanding.
- A clear vision and master plan is vital to ensure clarity of purpose, commitment, effectiveness and authenticity of Adventist schools.
- A regular, systematic review process is necessary to evaluate the ongoing effectiveness of Adventist schools in achieving their stated goals.
- A statement of special character may also serve to focus interest, and motivate discussion, collaboration and research on fundamental aspects of Adventist education, thus contributing towards its refinement and enrichment.

### *For whom is it written?*

- School and system administrators
- Teachers
- Parents
- Church administrators, clergy and Church members
- School boards and governance groups
- Public authorities and interested members of the public
- Teacher education students and other prospective employees
- Academics and researchers

## SECTION 2

### *The Special Character of Adventist Education*

#### *Foundational Assumptions and Beliefs*

Adventist education is often described as “Christian education”. This means that all that is planned and happens in the school is anchored in a biblical worldview. The following elements are significant:

- ***God is the Ultimate Source*** — God is infinite and the primary source of life, wisdom, beauty and perfection. (*Gen 1:1; Acts 17:28*)
- ***God’s Creative Activity*** — God created and sustains the entire Universe. This creative action was intentional, structured and orderly, and a reflection of His personality. (*Gen 1 and 2; John 1:1-4; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:1-3*)
- ***Our Human Origin*** — God created perfect human beings in His own image with power to think, choose, act, and relate. (*Gen. 1: 26, 27; 2:7,15, 21-25; Ps. 8; Ps. 139:15,16*)
- ***How We Know*** — God has revealed something of Himself to humanity through His creative work, the person of Jesus Christ and the words of the Bible. (*Ps 19; Heb 1:1-3; John 1:4; John 14:9; Ps 119:105; 2 Tim 3:16*)
- ***Our Problem*** — By their own choice in Eden, humans rebelled against the Creator, shattering their open relationship with Him, and plunging themselves and the world into a conflict of cosmic proportions, between good and evil. As a consequence, the capacity of humanity to reflect the image of God was well nigh destroyed. (*Gen 3; Rom 3:23; Rom 8:22*)
- ***God’s Response*** — God, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, answered the problem of sin with a plan to restore human beings to God’s image, and the universe to its original state of perfection, love and harmony. (*John 3:16; Rev 21: 1, 3, 4, 27; 22:3,4*)
- ***Renewed Relationship*** — In accepting God’s plan of restoration, we begin a new relationship with God through Jesus, and maintain this relationship through the study of the Bible, prayer and worship. (*2 Cor 5:17; Rom 10:17; 1 Thess 5:17; Jas 5:16; Ps 119:105*)
- ***Our Hope and Destiny*** — God invites us to share these things with the world creatively and responsibly until He intervenes in history to bring about a restored creation. (*Rev 3:20; John 15; Matt 28: 18, 19; Rev 21:1*)

## *Special Characteristics Growing out of These Understandings*

These understandings provide a comprehensive frame of reference to inform the key aspects of day-to-day life in Adventist schools.

- ***The Ultimate Purpose of Education*** — The restoration of human beings to the image of their Maker through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and the balanced development of the whole person.
- ***Knowledge*** — Both a supernatural and a natural order is assumed, with God acknowledged as the essential source of all wisdom and virtue. Knowledge is viewed as more than merely intellectual. True knowledge encompasses cognitive, experiential, emotional, relational, intuitive, and spiritual elements functioning as an interrelated whole. Acquisition of true knowledge leads to understanding that manifested in wisdom, integrity and appropriate action.
- ***The Students*** — Students are recognised and respected as complex, multifaceted beings uniquely created in God's image. But as fallen creatures, they are seen with need to develop comprehensive wholeness and integrity, to reach their highest potential in all human faculties, and to fulfil God's purpose for their lives.
- ***The Role of the Teacher*** — The teacher-minister's role is of central importance in the life of the school. Teacher-ministers are expected to be exemplary models of Seventh-day Adventist culture and Christian graces, and to demonstrate professional competence in teaching, pastoral nurture and ministry.
- ***The Curriculum*** — All areas of study are approached from the perspective of the biblical worldview, within the context of the Cosmic Conflict theme. As a "balanced curriculum" that promotes an integrated perspective of faith and learning, it addresses the major developmental needs in the spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and vocational realms. It also reflects appreciation for Christian heritage, community building and citizenship, concern for social justice, and stewardship of the environment.
- ***Teaching and Learning*** — An appropriate emphasis is placed on all forms of true knowledge. There is sensitivity to the culture, typical methods and skills of the respective subject fields and their place within the scheme of learning from a Christian perspective. Teaching methods are sensitive to the diversity of the gifts and needs of all students and seek to actively engage them personally and collaboratively, and give opportunity to put into practice what has been learned. Excellence is encouraged and facilitated in all areas.
- ***The Total Environment*** — The school is seen as a total learning environment, with careful attention given to balance of study, worship, labour and recreation. It strives to be a community pervaded by spirituality, industry, a spirit of cooperation, a sense of safety and security, and respect for the diversity of individuals and cultures. Its approach to discipline strives to be redemptive by engaging the will and intelligence of students in developing self-control and values-based decision making. It also strives to maintain a close liaison with families and the Church in whose interests and ministries it shares.

***NOTE: These aspects are expanded and reflected upon in Section 3 of this document.***

## *Snapshots ~*

### *The Ideal Adventist Primary School*

#### *The Adventist primary school offers students*

- a climate in which they can understand what is pleasing to God, commit their lives to Him, and experience the joy of helping others;
- a balanced program that supports spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional and physical development;
- a core of knowledge and skills for everyday living appropriate to their age;
- an appreciation and respect for the home, the Church, the school, and the community.

#### *By the end of Adventist primary school, students should have had the opportunity*

- to respond to God's grace, and demonstrate their commitment through baptism, helping others, and showing willingness to do what is pleasing to God in every area of living;
- to develop positive attitudes and values towards God, society and others, the environment, material needs and themselves;
- to demonstrate competence in thinking, reasoning, decision-making, communicating and expressing as a foundation to schooling at the secondary level;
- to demonstrate interpersonal skills and emotional growth necessary for healthy relationships with their peers, family, and community;
- to know and practice basic principles of health and balanced living, including a wise use of time and entertainment media;
- to develop an appreciation for the dignity of work along with a growing awareness of career options appropriate to their interests and God-given abilities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a statement growing out of the First International Conference on the Philosophy of Christian Education convened by the general Conference Department of Education at Andrews University, April 7-9, 2001. See also the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, vol 10, Special Edition.

## *The Ideal Adventist Secondary School*

*The Adventist secondary school builds on what has been achieved at the primary level with a focus on values, choices, and Christ-like characterdevelopment. It offers students*

- a formal and informal curriculum in which academic study, spiritual values and daily life are integrated;
- a broad academic and vocational program leading to productive living and satisfying career choices;
- avenues whereby Christian faith is made relevant to their emerging needs, relationships with others and with God;
- an opportunity to develop a Christian lifestyle of values, service, and witness.

*Students completing the secondary level at an Adventist school should have had an opportunity*

- to commit their lives to God and reflect maturing faith, attitudes and values demonstrated in personal devotion, public worship, and service and witness to others;
- to demonstrate competencies that are foundational to excellence in tertiary education and the world of work;
- to demonstrate maturity and sensitivity towards their family, in the choice of friendships, in preparation for marriage, and in broad participation within their Church and community;
- to learn how to make good decisions and wise choices in ways that demonstrate their belief in the body as a temple of God, including the use of time and discrimination in the choice of music, media and other forms of entertainment;
- to have developed a strong work ethic, functioning competently in everyday life as well as within entry-level work experiences appropriate to their interests and God-given abilities. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from a statement growing out of the First International Conference on the Philosophy of Christian Education convened by the general Conference Department of Education at Andrews University, April 7-9, 2001. See also the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, vol 10, Special Edition.

## SECTION 3

### *Exploring the Special Characteristics*

#### *The Ultimate Purpose of Adventist Education*

The restoration of human beings to the image of their Maker through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and the balanced development of the whole person.

In essence, it envisages:

- the necessity of a relationship with Jesus Christ in order to know and understand what is pleasing to God;
- a process that holds an important place in God's plan of restoration, transformation and renewal, seeking to heal human disconnectedness resulting from the Fall, and which is part, therefore, of the ministry of the Gospel as commissioned by Jesus in the New Testament;
- a process that focuses on the development of the whole person - spiritually, intellectually, physically and socially;
- a process that leads to the reflection of God-likeness, personal integrity and unselfish service rather than the elevation of human greatness, material gain and status.

The term "whole person" carries with it important implications. Although aspects of personhood are identified as distinct elements, "holistic development" assumes the effective integration or interweaving of each with the others.

Other terms such as "thinking Christianly" are sometimes used to describe the result of the way Christian values and understandings are evident in what is taught and learned in the school, and the quality of the lifestyle and practice of people who make up the school community. It reflects a mindset that is sensitive to core values, positive relationships, and motivates consistent ethical and moral action.

This development is viewed as progressing through stages of maturity appropriate to age. From time to time, other terms have been adopted to describe to this process. The idea of "character development" is one of these. More recently, the expression "spiritual formation" has gained popularity, while another educator has taken a significant step in preferring the term "spiritual re-formation" in recognition of both *our origin, our fall, and our new potential*. Adventist educators often describe both the process and the result as "the integration of learning, faith and practice".

#### *Discussion Starters*

- Why is it important to have a systematic, clearly formed worldview when considering the major issues associated with Adventist education and our place within it?
- Why is it important to reflect, talk, and think critically about the principles of what we think and do as teachers?
- Adventist education is sometimes described as "Christian-centred" education. Discuss the meaning and significance of this expression.

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## *Knowledge*

A biblical view of knowledge recognises both a supernatural and a natural order where God is acknowledged as the ultimate, essential source of all wisdom and virtue.

A number of understandings and principles are grow out of this view:

- Knowledge is more than a body of factual information and marketable skills to be transmitted, learned, reproduced and applied. While the place of scientific and technical knowledge and the so-called “academic” or intellectual aspect is appreciated, it is recognised as only one part of the picture.
- True knowledge encompasses cognitive, experiential, emotional, relational, intuitive, and spiritual elements functioning as an interrelated whole. Adventist education seeks to restore to factual information its true meaning as a means of knowing God and His creation, and acting responsibly as disciples, servants and stewards to one another and the created environment
- The commonly viewed distinction between the sacred and secular is artificial and false. All truth is part of God’s order, and His presence can be recognised and practised in even the apparently secular and mundane aspects of life. (Terms such as “a Christian mind” and “practising the presence of God” try to capture the scope and reality of such knowledge.)
- Acquisition of true knowledge leads to understanding that is manifested in wisdom, integrity, appropriate action and worship. True knowledge is active by nature — “knowing” *is* “doing”, and knowing comes *through* “doing”.
- Knowledge is grounded in the worldview shared by a cultural group, and that knowledge is typically expressed as a narrative or “master story”. In Adventist education, the “Cosmic Conflict” as portrayed in the Bible is that master story, providing a frame of reference to make sense of all the issues of life, and giving guidance in ethical and moral values underlying relationships and activities.

### *Discussion Starters*

- What does knowledge and learning have to do with the development of faith?
- How does the Cosmic Conflict “grand story” help us to understand the major questions of life? What *are* those major questions?
- Why is postmodernity such a threat to what Adventist education stands for and seeks to achieve?

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## *The Students*

In Adventist schools, students are recognised as uniquely created in God's image, dependent on Him as the Source of life, meaning, understanding and purpose. This implies that they are intended to be "image bearers", designed to reflect, in small measure, aspects of what God is like.

Students are thus multifaceted and complex people. To meet the needs of these students, Adventist educators see them as:

- religious, spiritual beings who seek meaning and also seek to know that which is true, good and beautiful;
- individually unique beings, with diverse capacities, gifts, and emerging theories about the world.
- intelligent, thoughtful, with a capacity to discover, interpret, and communicate understandings;
- decision-makers with freedom to choose and act;
- creative, emotional and expressive beings;
- relational, cultural beings - socially, environmentally;
- responsible and accountable beings;
- equally valuable in the sight of God.

While appreciating these characteristics, it is also recognised that:

- Human perceptions and judgements are finite by nature and potentially flawed because of the Fall.
- Human thinking, interpretations and understandings will always be incomplete, sometimes inaccurate, but ever-growing throughout life.

### *Discussion Starters*

- How does our understanding of what it means to be human influence the way we should relate to students?
- Identify how different aspects of a school program provide nurture for the specific facets of human personality and development identified above. Evaluate a school program with which you are familiar and determine whether you feel any needs may not be catered for adequately.

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## *The Role of the Teacher*

The teacher-minister's role in Adventist education is of central importance in the life of the school. As well as being experts in their teaching fields and their ability to promote and support learning in those areas, the teacher's role in Adventist schools is more extensive and holistic. Some have described true teaching as "a sharing of realities", likening the teaching process to "weaving connections" between their subjects, themselves and the world till the students make it their own. Thus, Adventist educators are expected to function:

- as people of faith and integrity who
  - share the vision of the school and its goals;
  - model the culture, ethos and lifestyle of the school system;
  - are loyal supporters of the school and its operation;
  - actively nurture children and adolescents in pastoral ministry;
  - share their own faith journey with students;
  - are conscious of the impact they have upon the unplanned learning of their students.
- as professional educators who are:
  - competent in their respective fields of teaching;
  - competent in motivating and maintaining high levels of engagement in learning;
  - fair, just, non-discriminatory and emotionally supportive;
  - sensitive to the spiritual implications and connections inherent in their learning area;
  - critically self-reflective and seekers of excellence philosophically, theoretically and practically, with an openness to new perspectives;
  - open to collegial appraisal and review;
  - collegial contributors and participants in the school as a community of learning.

### *Discussion Starters*

- A common reason given by teachers for their chosen vocation is that they "want to make a difference". What is the significance of such a statement in the light of this discussion?
- Compile a list of metaphors that portray aspects of the teacher's role. Discuss the implications of these metaphors.
- Access a copy of "The School as a Community of Grace", cited below. Discuss the implications of the section, "The Place of the Teacher".
- Over 400 years ago, Brother Lawrence "practised the presence of God through the washing of pots and pans and serving his brothers". What did he mean, and how might we see the everyday tasks of teaching in this light?

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## *The Curriculum*

Because God is acknowledged as the essential source of all wisdom and virtue, Adventist educators recognise dependence on Him for meaning, understanding and purpose. Thus God reveals something of Himself in many different forms to enlighten, guide and support human development. For these reasons, Adventist schools aspire to facilitate learning and appreciate knowledge as more than mere factual information for its own sake.

Adventist schools also recognise and respect the place of the traditional disciplines or learning areas to represent particular realms of meaning that are typical of the subject. It sees these as part of the human quest to explore, discover, understand, test, and communicate meaning as represented by these fields, and it encourages their study as part of the formal curriculum of the school. In selection, a balance is sought between spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, emotional, understanding. The curriculum also seeks to develop an appreciation for Christian heritage, community building, citizenship, social justice, and stewardship of the environment and resources.

To provide an appropriate context, the disciplines are to be studied from the perspective of the biblical worldview, within the context of the Cosmic Conflict theme. Consequently, they function as:

- *“windows”* to see or perceive and understand something of God and His activity as reflected through the created world, the Bible and the Cosmic Conflict, and also as
- *“windows of opportunity”* to respond, apply, express and practise in ways that are consistent with biblical values. (These are sometimes described as “Kingdom” values because of their foundation in the New Testament account of Jesus’ life and teachings.)

While some learning areas will fit closely with one category, they often have relevance with both.

Similarly, they are not discrete one from the other. Because they all find their shared origin in “God’s reality”, logical cross-disciplinary linkages are recognised and followed, particularly in the primary and middle years of study. This can be seen as providing opportunity for “integration” around relevant themes of study.

### *Discussion Topics*

- How does “thinking Christianly” change the way we think about the subjects we teach, and the way we teach them?
- How does a biblical worldview, provide a context from which we might understand, organise and present the subjects of study in an Adventist school?
- What challenges do secular humanism and postmodernity make to the way we approach the study of our subjects in Adventist schools?

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## *Teaching and Learning*

An Adventist school aspires to provide an enriched, meaningful, and spiritually and culturally sensitive learning environment. It seeks to make connections between the knower and the known, between the head and the heart, and to promote the development of sophisticated maps of meaning in the minds of its students. Thus:

- It is sensitive to the culture, typical methodology and skills of the different learning areas and where they fit within the larger scheme of learning.
- Teaching approaches will acknowledge and affirm the diversity of intelligences and gifts shared between the learners, and promote excellence in all facets of development.
- Teachers will generally function with students as facilitators and mentors in an interactive, emotionally supportive manner.
- Student questions will be valued and addressed constructively.
- Students will often work in collaborative, cooperative learning and peer-sharing settings.
- Teachers will recognize and follow opportunities to explore new spiritual insights and understandings, both planned and incidental, and encourage personal decisions and commitment in students.
- The school program will provide opportunities and support active learning and application. This will involve unselfish sharing and service in a wide range of activities, both within and beyond the school.

### *Discussion Topics*

- How do contemporary views of teaching and learning such as multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, gifted-and-talented education, brain-compatible learning and constructivist teaching relate to the views of learning represented in this document?
- Access a copy of James Tucker's paper (cited below). Evaluate the teaching and learning with which you are familiar in the light of the views presented.

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## *The Total Environment*

Life in the school is seen as part of a total learning environment, with careful attention to a balance between study, worship, labour and recreation. It is a community in which spirituality, industry, a spirit of cooperation, a sense of safety and security, and respect for the diversity of individuals and cultures are valued and nurtured. In each school:

- The school environment is seen as providing a cultural context that fosters and maintains personal and group integrity. It is expected that this ethos will be reflected in both the formal and informal program of the school.
- Teachers and staff will model consistently the ethos of the environment.
- Teachers, students and others, as cultural beings will participate in the seeking and sharing of meanings and communicating them through language, story, symbolism, ritual and acceptable standards. This environment and culture seeks to be Christian generally, and Seventh-day Adventist in particular.
- The culture and ethos of the school will consistently reflect the practical acceptance of a biblical worldview and its implicit values. It will reflect an awareness of this “master story” and its capacity to answer ultimate questions and issues of life and practice.
- Interpersonal relationships will support every individual in the culture of the school as a community of faith, encouraging them to live out and share the community’s story actively and confidently. These relationships will be sensitive, accepting, inclusive, affirming and supportive of all members of that community.
- The approach to discipline will strive to be redemptive by engaging the will and intelligence of students in developing self-control and values-based decision making.
- While community is fundamentally important, individuality and personal identity is not denied, but held in healthy tension. The quest to restore wholeness is not exclusively self-centred, but extends to the community and beyond.
- The school community will function in a complementary relationship with the family, the Church, and other schools in the system.

### *Discussion Topic*

- Christian schools have sometimes been described as “communities of faith” or “communities of grace”. What might this mean, and how does this relate to Adventist schools?
- How does the idea of “redemptive discipline” fit with the idea of schools as “communities of grace”?

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### ***Additional Discussion Starters***

- Why is it important to have a systematic, clearly formed worldview when considering the major issues associated with Christian education and our place within it?
- What is the value in reflecting on, talking, and thinking critically about the principles of what we do as teachers in Adventist schools?

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### ***Prepared by:***

Don C. Roy, Ph.D  
Associate National System Director - Curriculum  
Adventist Schools Australia

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(Principal, Border Christian College, Albury)

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