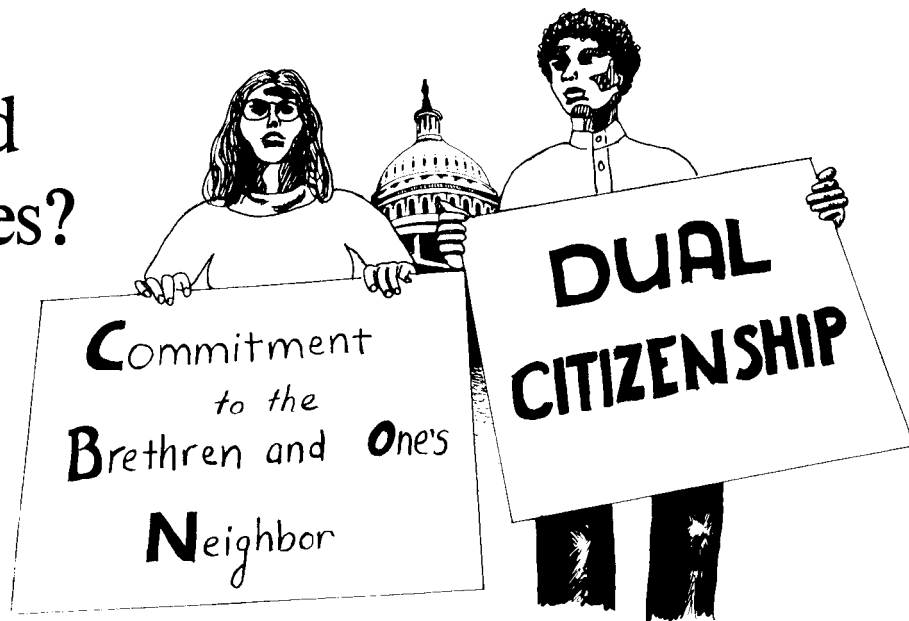


# How Should the Christian Teacher Relate to Politics and Social Issues?

By B. B. Beach



**E**xploitation and injustice are rampant in the world today. Colossal social, political, and economic problems increasingly absorb the attention and efforts of government and society. Are these matters of any direct concern to Christian teachers? Does Adventist education have a social obligation?

Some people tend to think that the Christian church has little, if any, social responsibility and certainly no political role to play. Others insist that the church has incontestable political responsibilities and that its main task is to improve the world and work toward the establishment of a Christian social order and eventually the setting up of the kingdom of God on earth.

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## Christ's Example and Teaching

In addressing this issue, the example of the Master Teacher is, of course, of utmost importance to teachers. Jesus spoke very little in terms of a political society to

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which His disciples should aspire. He did not claim to be a social reformer. He formulated no socio-political platform on which the church could stand or conduct her program. He refused, for example, to be a judge in property disputes and controversies of this kind (Luke 12:13, 14).

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness were to some extent

political in nature. He had at least three opportunities to attempt to take over society's rule by a sort of *coup d'etat*: (1) the feeding of the multitude (Luke 9:13-17); (2) His triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:30-44); and (3) the experience with Peter's sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and available divine legions (Matthew 26: 51-53). However, Jesus rejected crusadism and zealotlike kingship. He made it clear that His kingdom was not of this world.

Having said this, we must also recognize Jesus' sensitivity to acute human needs. His teachings inevitably have a significant socio-economic fallout. In Luke 4:16-21 (quoting from Isaiah 61) Jesus presented the Messianic task as a social one: good news to the poor, freedom for the captives, sight for the blind, liberty for the oppressed. Christ's life and ministry clearly show that these aspects of the gospel should not be interpreted as referring exclusively to

spiritual poverty, blindness, and oppression. After all, good news has little meaning if it lacks a social dimension.

The concept that Jesus' teachings are irrelevant to the formulation of a social ethic (because He expected the kingdom to come very soon) is a questionable one. True, His teachings do not provide a complete code of ethical directives, but they surely direct His followers toward the orientation of love and reciprocal subordination. "Below all his teaching was the sympathy which identified Jesus with the unfortunate, the poor, and the oppressed."<sup>11</sup> "Never was there another whose sympathies were so broad or so tender. A sharer in all the experiences of humanity . . ."<sup>12</sup> As Jesus interpreted His Messianic mission through acts of love, so His followers need today to "concentrate upon a life of goodness," performing deeds that are "profitable to men" (Titus 3:8, Phillips and RSV)<sup>3</sup> in the local and wider community.

Throughout the centuries, faithful disciples of Jesus have felt a social responsibility resting on their shoulders. This was true in New Testament times as well as in the nineteenth century, when American revivalists preached the

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### *The Christian . . . has "dual citizenship."*

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gospel of personal, inner salvation, but were also concerned about alcoholics, the poor, the unemployed, slaves, hunted Indians, and oppressed women.

#### **Ellen G. White—Social Reformer**

Ellen White was one of the social reform giants of the late nineteenth century. Her writings reveal a winsome social

conscience. For example, she expressed concern for drunkards,<sup>4</sup> victims of injustice,<sup>5</sup> the physically sick,<sup>6</sup> the mentally ill,<sup>7</sup> the poor,<sup>8</sup> and the blind.<sup>9</sup> She also felt a great burden for the youth, advocating that young people with properly cultivated faculties should be given positions of trust.<sup>10</sup> She wrote at great length about educational reform, in order to effect "a permanent change for the better in society."<sup>11</sup> While she discouraged feminine activism,<sup>12</sup> the cause of oppressed women was close to her heart.<sup>13</sup> She did not, however, suffer from the quixotic illusions of social gospel advocates regarding the sure perfectibility of man and his social structures. She was

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### *Commitment to Jesus Christ means commitment to the brethren and one's neighbor.*

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fully aware that "the gospel of [Christ's] grace alone can cure the evils that curse society."<sup>14</sup> Early Adventist pioneers shared this view.

Christianity should not be seen as a religion of isolated individualism or insulated introversion; it is a social religion. It is not just "pie in the sky by and by"; Christian living begins today and has practical meaning for the here and now. Christian virtues have social implications. Commitment to Jesus Christ means commitment to the brethren and one's neighbor.

#### **Dilemma of Dual Citizenship**

It is precisely at this point that the Christian faces a dilemma: He has "dual citizenship." He belongs to the kingdom of God and a kingdom of this world. It is in this area of dual relationship that social

responsibility can cause tension and lead to conflict between divine and earthly authority.

Some Seventh-day Adventists have felt little, if any, need of community involvement. They view

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### *The New Testament contains little instruction on how to deal with varying social and political structures.*

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their responsibility exclusively in terms of "the world to come." But God "so loved" *this* world, and His love must be reflected in the lives and service of His followers.

#### **Double Danger**

The social responsibility dilemma to which we have referred above is highlighted in Romans 13 and Revelation 13. While Paul exhorts Christians to offer conscientious service to the state, because it is its task to lead men to better lives, John advocates obedience to God's will when the state would enforce a contrary obedience that would enslave the spirit and bodies of men. Even life itself should be yielded rather than conscience.

The double danger, then, is that Christians will either readapt Christianity as an escape or refuge religion surrounded by the moat of mystical conservatism, or bring religion into line with government pressure and policy in such a way as to lead to Christianity's politicization.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Historical Trends**

The New Testament contains little instruction on how to deal with varying social and political structures. It contains not so much social or political doctrine as counsel regarding the individual behavior of Christians as citizens

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along with exhortations to respect, obey, and pray for those in authority in government. Thus, the early Christians did not consider their faith as having much of a social or

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*The Gospels clearly indicate that the kingdom of God is not an earthly paradise built by men as instruments of the divine will.*

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political role in building up or changing the community or government. However, a millennium later—by the Middle Ages—both clergy and laity felt that the Catholic Church had the responsibility of laying down rules for politics and economics.

By the Age of Enlightenment (eighteenth century) the concept of separation of church and state began to assert itself. It was increasingly felt that the church had no jurisdiction or competence in so-called secular matters. From the late nineteenth century, the pendulum has swung back toward greater church involvement in socio-political questions. Five well-known aspects of this current trend are listed below:

1. *Social gospel.* This theological trend was strongest in early twentieth-century America. It reinterprets the moral teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets and endeavors to make the gospel relevant by applying these moral norms to social problems that beg for solution.

2. *Secular ecumenism.* This brand of ecumenism aims not only at Christian unity, but also at the unity of all human beings in service to the world.

3. *Diaconia.* Here the emphasis is on the service dimensions of Christianity in helping build the

new socialist society. This movement is found in eastern Europe.

4. *Theology of hope.* Associated with Jürgen Moltmann, this philosophy presents an optimistic view of future events built around the theme of hope. According to this view, revolution can change the course of history, and the Christian message is one of revolutionary hope for society now, not just for the world after the Second Coming.

5. *Theology of liberation.* Christian faith and its political relevance are interpreted in the light of Marxist social analysis. God is the liberator of the socially and economically oppressed. This philosophy is seen in Latin America.

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*What is the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility?*

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This greater church involvement in socio-political issues could prove to be a dangerous trend. It tends to eclipse the central salvific gospel in favor of the peripheral social gospel. Salvation of human beings from sin is neglected; salvation from the consequences of sin, such as hunger, racism, underdevelopment, and exploitation, is emphasized. The new birth of the individual is seen largely as a pietistic vestige of old-time revivalism. Emphasis now falls on restructuring society, rather than on creating new people.

We should never forget that even if through some magical socio-political formula it were possible to create a utopian dream-world where every man, woman, and child would be properly fed, comfortably housed, nicely clothed, well-educated, and suitably employed, what would it profit

men and women to have won the whole material world and still have lost their own souls? Apart from God and His rule there can be no just society, no lasting peace and happiness, no true self-fulfillment.

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**Roots of “Kingdom of God on Earth” Concept**

Christian socio-political gospel activists generally wish to create the kingdom of God on earth. The basis of this concept is not found in authentic Christianity, but in the Constantinian union of church and state, humanistic utopianism, Darwinian social transformationalism, and the Marxist dream of a stateless and classless society.

Throughout American history there has been an undercurrent of thought that has perceived a special role for Americans in establishing the kingdom of God on earth. This concept has been nourished by the Calvinist-Puritan concept of the “covenant relationship” and by postmillennialism. According to this view, the United States is to be the light of the world.

However, the Gospels clearly in-

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*Adventist teachers must . . . implant seeds of love, good will, kindness, peace, justice, temperance, health, and dignity.*

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dicating that the kingdom of God is not an earthly paradise built by men as instruments of the divine will. Jesus “was not seeking to establish the Kingdom of God but to prepare men to enter it.”<sup>16</sup> The kingdom is associated with divine judgment and the passing away of the present earth and its worldly kingdoms—through divine inter-

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should be clustered around the library. Too often the academic respectability of a discipline is measured by its distance from the library!

Student social and residential buildings should be located near the student center. Athletics and physical-activities buildings should be similarly situated. Married-student housing should be located near shopping facilities and park or recreational spaces. The areas used most frequently by visitors (administration, cultural, or athletic activities) should be placed near the campus entrance or on the periphery, thus limiting cross-campus traffic.

The location of the church, auditorium, and other worship areas should be carefully considered, since they present a statement to the general public and the school family. The church needs to be near the entrance to the campus. First impressions are important. Through them, visitors should recognize that the institution is a Christian school and that religious gatherings are a vital component of the educational experience. Likewise, worship rooms in residential halls should be placed in prominent locations.

Adequate space must be allowed for industrial and agricultural activities. The work program is a unique feature of Adventist education. Where such activities are located testifies to the importance placed on them. Direct external access to school industries is required, though not necessarily through the front entrance.

Locating facilities is often left to last-minute decisions and pressures of immediate needs. Careful consideration must be given to future expansion and requirements. The natural beauty of the campus, the ecology, and the distance between buildings are features that enhance

the efficiency and effectiveness of a campus. Care must be taken not to crowd buildings in the inner campus, thus hindering future expansion; but at the same time, not to spread buildings too far apart. Walking time between buildings that are farthest apart should not be more than seven minutes.

### Financial Planning

A critical component of any master plan is financing, yet this feature is often slighted or totally omitted. Even if an excellent master plan is compiled, it may be unrealistic unless resources are available for its implementation. Without financing, the plan may end up being nothing more than an academic exercise.

Fiscal constraints may require the master plan to be divided into phases or stages. This can be a positive step, as the cash flow or ability of the construction crew may limit the total development of the plan at one time. In such cases, the plan can be reassessed as it is implemented, allowing the planners to innovate and readjust to changing conditions. Also, the additional time may allow the school a better opportunity to raise money to staff the proposed plan. No school should build faster than it is able to staff the desired programs.

### In Conclusion

Change and ambiguity are elements of concern facing every educational administrator. Master planning is the logical response to these uncertainties. The two major components of master planning (academic and physical) are interrelated and interdependent. The physical aspect without the academic is subject to pure speculation, whereas the academic without the physical is meaningless

and ineffective. These two phases of master planning must also be supported by a realistic, yet all-encompassing, long-range financial plan. □

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Campus Planning: Redesign, Redevelopment, Rethinking: Proceedings of a Professional Development Symposium* (Dallas: Myrick-Newman-Dahlberg and Partners, 1983), Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Richard P. Dober, *Campus Planning* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1963), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> W. Robert Bokelmand and John B. Rork, *College and University Facilities Survey, Part 2: Planning for College and University Physical Plant Expansion, 1956-1970*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education (Circular No. 603), 1960, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Based on "Master Planning of College Campuses," a class paper presented by Amos Simorangkir, a graduate student, Fall, 1976, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

## The Christian Teacher, Politics, and Social Issues

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vention (2 Peter 3:10, 11). God's justice, not human justice, will be vindicated.

Though Christ has overcome the world and the final triumph of God's kingdom is assured, His lordship in no way implies that Satan is no longer prince of this world or that the earth has already been or is gradually being fully restored. It in no way guarantees that human beings and this world are gradually giving fuller expression to God's authority.

### Evangelism and Social Responsibility

In view of the current penchant toward church social involvement, one is entitled to ask, What is the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility? At the present time we see a polarization of views regarding Christian mission. The traditional view equates mission with evangelism, whereas the contemporary ecumenical view sees mission primarily as social

renewal dealing with the structures of society and aiming at a kind of social harmony. The latter view leaves little room for evangelism.

The Biblical view of mission is that of service in word and action. In this concept of service we find a synthesis of evangelism and social activity. John Stott has presented three ways of relating social outreach to evangelism:<sup>17</sup>

1. Social action is a means to evangelism.

2. Social action is an aspect or part of evangelism.

3. Social action is a partner or a parallel activity to evangelism.

The third view seems most nearly correct. Both evangelistic and social service responsibility are needed. Though they support each other, they are separate aspects of mission. While evangelism must always be the overarching responsibility, the immediate priority may differ.

What was the most important need of the badly hurt traveller on the Jericho road? Was it a Bible study? Of course not; he desperately needed immediate medical attention. While teachers must always hold high before their students the Christian task of evangelism, they must also inspire their pupils with the desire for voluntary community involvement to meet pressing needs.

Adventist teachers must be seed planters, not just sin plaintiffs. They must implant seeds of love, good will, kindness, peace, justice, temperance, health, and dignity. Take for example the vital question of a just, free, and peaceful society. Although such a society will never really materialize prior to the Second Coming, it is the mission of Adventist teachers to bear witness to the coming of such a truly revolutionary society by standing for justice, equality, brotherhood, and peace *now*.

James says: "True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sown in a spirit of peace" (James 3:18, NEB).<sup>18</sup> This witness of teachers must find demonstration in their lives and example as they come to grips with the dynamic realities of community existence.

### The Teacher and Politics

There is little doubt that Seventh-day Adventist teachers must be very circumspect when it comes to political activity. They may wish to raise questions, point to moral principles, challenge their students to think through important issues facing society. They will, however,

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refrain from using the classroom to identify with political parties or to support party platforms and policies.

Ellen White states rather categorically that Bible teachers "are not at liberty to unite in making apparent their prejudices for or against political men or measures" and that teachers with great zeal in politics should not continue in educational responsibility.<sup>19</sup> She gives several reasons for this: (1) Teachers should concentrate on their appointed work and not be diverted by involvement in battles in the political world; (2) There is danger that such involvement will cause division, contention, discord, and even schisms in the church; (3) Pol-

itics exalts the character and work of political leaders, but teachers are to exalt the Lord; and (4) It is not possible to know what a candidate for political office really will do when elected—some will use their influence to repress religious liberty.<sup>20</sup> (A recent illustration: How many Americans supported candidates in the last U.S. election who quite unexpectedly established diplomatic relations with the Roman Catholic Church through its Holy See?)

This circumspection must be the rule for the Christian teacher. While not taking an active role in partisan politics, he or she will speak when questions have clear moral answers and are capable of alternative moral characterizations. He or she will also stand firmly for personal rights and religious liberty.

### The Christian Teacher— Salt and Light in Society

It would appear that politics can never be made truly Christian. Nevertheless, the Adventist teacher must play some positive role in public affairs. The arena of love is the world. Teachers cannot turn their backs on the world because of its sinfulness. They cannot contract out of this world and human responsibility. Adventist teachers must not live in a "scholastic ghetto," but must endeavor, as salt and light, to permeate and influence non-Christian society in order to draw men and women to Christ. Of course, as indicated earlier, social concern is not to be equated with evangelism, but they are certainly not mutually exclusive.

Adventist educators have a social part to play. Often this will appear to be a Sisyphean labor and the best efforts will seem like those of a man bailing out a leaky boat. Adventist teachers must not, how-

ever, let the inevitable failures and sense of helplessness turn them into cynical or indifferent spectators of the socio-political scene. Neither can they allow themselves to fall into the quixotic pitfall of expecting an evolutionary utopia, imagining that mere human efforts will provide definitive panaceas.

The Christian teacher will seek to preserve society, but he or she will also shed light into the darker corners of community life that need to be dealt with and even changed. The Christian teacher will try to inspire his or her students to act likewise and light candles of social involvement, rather than simply denouncing the darkness of the world. The Adventist teacher is buoyed up by eschatological optimism. He has social concern. This is why he prays: "Come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). □

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Shailer Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> The text credited to Phillips is from *The New Testament in Modern English* © J. B. Phillips. Used by permission of The Macmillan Company.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1909), pp. 172, 331, 338, 339.

<sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1944), p. 372; \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 3, p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1946), p. 544.

<sup>7</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 184; \_\_\_\_\_, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1932), p. 232.

<sup>8</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 620; vol. 2, p. 570; vol. 1, p. 481.

<sup>9</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 517, 518; \_\_\_\_\_, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 242.

<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 367.

<sup>11</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1930), p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 421.

<sup>13</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1913), pp. 46, 59.

<sup>14</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1941), p. 254.

<sup>15</sup> J. Ellul, "Social Change," *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 631.

<sup>16</sup> Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> John R. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: Illinois Intersarsity Press, 1975), pp. 26, 27.

<sup>18</sup> From *The New English Bible*. © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press 1970. Reprinted by permission.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923), pp. 475, 477.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 475-484.

## To Educate the Imagination

(Continued from page 7)

A belief in the "uselessness" of the arts, therefore, may indicate a need for the education of the imagination, a need that the very requirements being protested against are designed to address. In my opinion, the primary value of the arts to our technical majors is that their power helps foster change and growth, thus furthering the primary goal of Adventist education. So long as our colleges retain character development as the first priority in education, we shall need to enlist the aid of these powerful educational tools. □

## Financing Church Colleges

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Some teachers may feel insecure about having their work examined in this way, but in the long run such evaluations will help to give teachers credit for the hard work they are performing. It should be noted that, generally speaking, most employees feel they are working harder than anyone else. Some academic departments also feel that they are carrying a disproportionate share of the teaching loads. Actual observation of activities and hours worked may help settle the issue of work loads.

Administrators should allow each teacher to reach his or her own potential. Possibly a "management by objectives" approach

—such as rewards for publications, teaching excellence, research, or counseling—could allow each teacher to pursue his or her own area of excellence.

Most teachers do want to teach, and administrators should allow them full loads, along with the proper recognition and rewards for hard work. A good rule for administrators to use in their dealings with teachers is to have as few teachers as possible, work them hard, and treat them lavishly.

### Reconsider Expensive Programs

3. In making spending decisions colleges shouldn't commit large amounts of money to a few people.

*SDA colleges should not allow themselves to become—or remain—generic institutions.*

One of the trends carried forward from the 1960s, when increasing enrollments allowed for expansion of programs, was to offer programs that served only a few students. Now that enrollments are decreasing, schools must reconsider and perhaps eliminate some of these programs.

### Adjust Wage Scales

4. Allow the wage scales to more nearly reflect the market rate of pay. About one-third of the workers in our schools are paid more than the market rate; about one-third receive just about the right amount; and one-third are underpaid. It takes no genius to discover that the "overpaid" stay and the "underpaid" leave. The college may thus perpetuate incompetence while losing its most creative and productive employees.

5. Periodically visit other institutions and survey their programs.