
Pastor and Teacher— Cooperating for Success

By Monte Sahlin

Let's face it. There are some tensions between pastoral and educational workers in the Adventist denomination. If you listen carefully at any workers' meeting or teacher in-service event, you will hear concerns about equal pay, conflicts over scarce resources, and a lack of perceived support for one another's ministries. Sometimes educators are critical of the evangelistic style of pastors, and at times pastors question the spiritual commitment of educators.

The tragedy of this tension is that it comes at a time when church and educational ministries need to stand together. Both the local church and the church school face stagnant growth patterns, an economic pinch, and questions from their constituents about their mission and purpose. Pastors and teachers need each other more than ever! They need to support each other as they face the difficult issues of the present and the future.

Several years ago I was asked to work with the board of a small church school. The board faced a "no win" situation. Projected enrollment for the next school year was only four children. The conference executive committee

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had told the board that it could not operate another year unless amounts owed for teachers' services for previous years were paid by June 30. The teacher felt that the church should provide a special subsidy to cover this cost and continue the school. The pastor believed that too much of the church budget was already going for the school. Parents were unwilling to send their children a distance of more than 50 miles to the nearest church school, and one family said it would move away if no church school were provided. As I interviewed the key people involved,

much of their attention focused on assigning blame.*

The teacher told me that the pastor and the church were not supportive enough. The pastor said that the school was bleeding the church to death. The chairman of the school board stated that the problem was caused by the conference's handling of the situation. Nonetheless, they all wanted to have a successful Christian education program and quickly agreed when I suggested a collaborative approach to the problem. Since that time I have heard similar stories in many other places, and each story reinforces my belief that an intentional strategy of collaboration is necessary for pastors, teachers, and board members to work together productively.

In this article I will suggest some collaboration strategies, propose some plans that might be useful, and finally share a vision of what I believe can result from effective collaborative outreach by church and school. These suggestions will need to be adapted to meet the unique needs of your situation, and no one will be able to do all of them. However, I hope that these suggestions will stimulate a new kind of dialog between teachers and pastors, combined with a lot

*I have carefully protected the identities of those involved in this story, which happened in a different conference from the one I presently serve.

of creative thinking, experimentation, and prayer.

The Collaboration Strategy

Pastors and teachers need to become allies in dealing with the problems they and their institutions face, instead of allowing the issues to divide them. Eva Schindler-Rainman and Ronald Lippit, two highly respected authorities on collaborative processes, report that collaboration is often necessary to solve seemingly intractable problems in organizations and communities, and that it almost always releases a great deal of creative energy and momentum for change. They also observe that some basic elements must be in place for a collaborative effort to be successful.¹

Collaboration begins with honest, open communication. This communication must be built on trust developed in personal time together. Take the initiative and invite your pastor to a family social event. Set up a regular weekly talk time. Larger churches and schools, especially where the school is sponsored by a single church, might consider setting up a regular schedule of joint staff meetings.

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The issues need to be laid out on the table; all of the hidden feelings, pressures, and realities must be discussed openly. In so doing, the focus should not be on blame or jealousy. If pastors and teachers cannot get beyond their personal

hurts and perceived injustices, then both the church and the school will suffer. A collaborative dialog needs to begin with a clear goal—developing an alliance that helps strengthen both institutions as they learn to support each other.

This requires careful research. What percentage of the tithe is being used for pastoral support, for Christian education, for evangelism? What percentage of the local church budget goes to school subsidy, to student aid, to indirect subsidy? How many of the children from church-related families attend church school? How much of the pastor's time is spent in school board and related committees, in worships and baptismal classes at the school, in other

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school-related activities? How much time does the teacher put into church offices, Sabbath school or Pathfinder responsibilities, and visitation of parents and prospective students?

Considerable data can be collected. Growth charts for church membership and school enrollment can be assembled and compared. Tithe, local church giving, and tuition income can be charted, and the combined investment computed for the average supportive family. The percentage of inactive church members and families whose children are not in church school can be compared. All of this helps to move the dialog away from blame to problem-solving.

When the general data have been collected and reviewed, it is time for the pastor and teacher to interview two groups of constituents—

the strong supporters of the school and church, and those who have school-age children but have not enrolled them in church school.

In many churches the church school requires a major portion of the overall budget, yet its work is viewed as separate from the church itself.

Some of the latter group may be inactive church members. At least ten to 12 visits should be made, dividing them equally between the two categories.

It is vital that both pastor and teacher participate in these interviews. Human nature is such that we all tend to tell people what we think they want to hear. As a result, unless they conduct the interviews jointly, the teacher and pastor will get differing messages from the same constituents.

The pastor and the teacher should agree in advance on several key questions to ask, such as: How can we increase the financial viability of our church and school? What needs to be done to increase church attendance and school enrollment? What needs do the families have that are not being met? Why are some families not enrolling their children in the church school? Be sure that those interviewed understand that you have come to listen, not to recruit or raise funds. Encourage them to level with you. Don't argue with them, or present any "answers"—just take notes!

After each interview, the pastor and teacher will want to share their feelings about what they heard. Later, after all the interviews have been completed, a working session

should be scheduled when they can systematically work through the notes that were taken. Summary responses to the key questions need to be clustered on a flip-chart or chalkboard. Trends need to be identified. The pastor and teacher should work together to understand the dynamics of the people, resisting the urge to find evidence to support their own feelings.

Joint Efforts

Next, the pastor and the teacher should present the results of their interviews to a joint meeting of the church board and school board, along with the statistical and financial data they have collected. Such a meeting offers opportunities for long-range planning, and can encourage further collaboration between the two boards and the entire staff.

The vast majority of Adventist churches have only two major missional objectives—public evangelism and Christian education. Many of them invest in Christian education about eight times what they invest in public evangelism. The church school is *the* primary missionary project of most Adventist congregations in North America. Yet it is usually operated at arm's length from the church. This leads to the perception that it is a separate institution into which the church is pouring its resources at a time when it is struggling to find enough resources to continue routine nurture and outreach activities, as well as to respond to new challenges.

Church School or Parents' School?

Teachers and pastors need to work together to bring the school closer to the church, to make it truly a *church* school and not a *parents'* school. This can be done in many ways. Teachers ought to be local elders in the church. Per-

haps the principal or head teacher should even be considered the associate pastor for Christian education. In fact, larger churches might find it worthwhile to use local funds to bring the school principal's pay up to the pastoral level. In return, the principal would spend some extra time working with the pastor in planning, visitation, recruitment, ministry to parents, and marketing the school.

The pastoral and school staffs should meet together regularly. A weekly staff meeting may be too much, especially in small schools

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and churches, but a monthly schedule ought to constitute a minimum expectation. The constituents deserve to hear the pastor and teacher "reading off the same page" in their ministries.

Christian Education Sabbath and worship and Sabbath school programs by students from the church school are traditions, but perhaps they need to be renewed and revitalized. Is there a way to include Christian education in the weekly worship liturgy? Since it is *the* major missionary investment of the congregation, should it not be more prominent?

If the church school is so important that the congregation places

nearly half its budget in the school, why not affirm the ministry of the school in every worship? Maybe the teacher should tell a children's story as part of each week's order of service, or include a two-minute school update during the personal ministries time. The teacher should have some visible role in the leadership of each worship service.

It is in worship that the church reminds itself of what it is, what it believes, and what it is trying to do in the world. During the weekly Sabbath service the church holds up before the Lord for His blessing those things it considers important. If, during these exercises, the church fails to mention the school, then the subliminal message is that the school is not important to the church.

For a number of reasons, teachers and pastors should consider a regular exchange of roles—the pastor teaching in the classroom and the teacher preaching in the pulpit. This would help slow the galloping process of specialization that is slowly separating the teaching ministry from the church and may one day cause it to be completely cut off. It would also help both pastor and teacher understand the demands placed upon the other. Most importantly, however, it would help both pastor and teacher to work as a team engaged in a joint ministry. Finally, it certainly would show the constituency that both considered the ministry of the other to be important.

Education as Outreach

The most fruitful area of collaboration between school and church is outreach. Recognition of this has grown as curricula have been developed for teaching upper-grade students to witness. Can the pastor, the teacher, and the board members also be involved in Chris-

(To page 46)

about this transformation of each learner.

Evidence of this growth in spiritual maturity comes in many ways, but my most gratifying experience was to have a child approach me this year and say, "When can I be baptized?" □

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Ellen G. White, Manuscript 6, 1889.
- ² _____, Manuscript 28, 1898.
- ³ _____, *Review and Herald* (January 10, 1882).
- ⁴ _____, Letter 35, 1887.

Pastor and Teacher

(Continued from page 10)

tian education outreach? Current policy seems to discourage the recruitment of significant numbers of non-Adventist students in our schools. Many pastors see this as indicating that Adventist educators do not regard their institutions as missionary enterprises. A new policy of seeking non-Adventist enrollments would prove one of our most fruitful strategies. It would both increase the resources available to fund our schools and bring about church growth.

Americans are demonstrating a growing interest in Christian education.

In February, 1983, *The New York Times* commissioned a national poll asking adults whether they would send their children to neighborhood public schools if the cost of private schools was not a factor. Of those responding, 37 percent said they would prefer to send their children to a private school. . . . The enrollment in non-Catholic religious schools has been climbing sharply—from approximately 600,000 in 1970 to approximately 1.7 million in 1983. The northeastern states, home of many long-established, elite, private preparatory schools, had the smallest increase of 48 percent. In the West, enrollment in private non-Catholic religious schools doubled, and in the middle Atlantic-Southern belt from Virginia to Texas the enrollment quadrupled. In the District of Columbia, the home of many federal employees, enrollment in private, non-Catholic religious schools tripled between 1970 and 1983. . . .

[One of] the fastest growing segments of the private school scene [is] nursery schools and kindergartens for children in the two- to five-year-old bracket, in which enrollment nearly quadrupled between 1965 and 1983.²

In one Midwest community, Adventists have been operating a church school for more than 40 years, and the enrollment has never been more than 125. Ten years ago, another conservative, Bible-oriented church began a Christian school that now has an enrollment of more than 400. More recently, a third Christian school has begun. Why are we not cashing in on this increased interest in Christian education?

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If parents are interested in Christian education and they find that their children have a good experience in our schools, it seems to me that they would consider joining our church. An Adventist parent who enrolled his child in a private Christian school told me that when the school year began, all parents were asked to attend an orientation meeting, during which the staff not only covered policies and schedules, but also made a very winsome and straightforward presentation of why it is important to accept Christ and how Christian values are taught in the classroom. At the end of the meeting, parents were told that if they had questions about faith, they could feel free to chat with any teacher privately at any time. Is it inappropriate for us to do the same?

Family-life ministries are entry

events that non-Adventist church school patrons might find especially interesting. Perhaps a parent resource center might be located in the church school, staffed by volunteers from the church and advertised as a community service. This might include a toy library with special emphasis on at-home educational experiences for preschool children, as well as a series of classes and seminars on parenting, discipline, prepared childbirth, et cetera. A weekly parent support group might be organized. This could serve as a pathway to Bible studies and attendance at church or public evangelistic meetings.

Instead of our church schools being positioned to take care of our own, why not organize them as outreach centers to families and children? The rationale of needing to defend our children from worldly influences is usually used to defend careful segregation, but today we have to face the facts that a great many "worldly" influences have wormed their way into church families via television and other public media, the attitudes of many parents, and the pervasive quality of modern secular culture. Maybe it is time to realize that "the best defense is a good offense," and fight back by intentionally making our schools evangelistic enterprises. □

NOTE: I would like very much to hear from pastors and teachers who are now collaborating or who wish to collaborate because of reading this article. If I can collect a number of firsthand case studies, I will summarize them in a future report. Send information to the Editor, JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION, 6840 Eastern Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20012 U.S.A.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Eva Schindler-Rainman and Ronald Lippitt, *The Volunteer Community: Creative Use of Human Resources* (Washington, D.C.: NTL Learning Resources, Inc., 1971).

² Lyle E. Schaller, "The Role of Private Christian Schools: Facts to Inform Your Position" (Privately published document available through Yokefellow Institute, Richmond, Indiana).