



Enhancing Pastor/Teacher Relationships



BY ROLAND J. HILL

Keeping church education alive and vibrant is an immense struggle in this age of spiraling inflation, decrease in real wages, and apathy and ambiguity of parents toward Christian education.

But as tough as these are to deal with, they are no match for the devastation and destruction left in the wake of a poor pastor-teacher relationship. This relationship is pivotal to the success of the church school. We cannot deny that there is a problem or hope that ignoring it will make it go away.

Of course, the pastor-teacher relationship is just one of many problems we must deal with in our church schools. However, it is one of the most crucial to solve. I believe that healing broken relationships between teachers and pastors will do more to ensure the success of the church school than any other single step.

In this article, it is my desire to honestly investigate and evaluate the apparent problems between pastors and teachers. I will draw on my many years of pastoral experience and my recent experience as a college professor to give as clear a picture of the problem as possible. I believe that problem solving

begins first with identifying the problem, not blaming or name calling. Once the problem is identified, then one can look for solutions.

Often when we seek to identify problems, we look for the complex while missing the obvious. The obvious in the pastor-teacher relationship is how we view relationships. Church schools have tended to overlook concerns about relationships. Instead, attention has centered on budgets, enrollment, and control issues. Hours are spent trying to raise the enrollment, wading through financial concerns, and fighting over who will control the school, while very little time is spent on building good relationships. W. Oscar Thompson, Jr. in his book *Concentric Circles of Concern*

writes:

The most important word in the English language, apart from proper nouns, is relationship. You say, but love has to be the most important word. I ask you, though, where is love going if there is not relationship? Relationship is the track. Love is what rolls over the track. Love moves through a relationship.¹

We must recognize that the success or failure of any

organization, church, school, or family depends to a large extent on relationships. Thompson is correct when he states,

*Solve the relationship problems and there would be no divorce, no war, no employer-employee or labor-management disputes. Solve the relationship problems of the world and humanity's most perplexing problems are solved.*²

As we tackle the problem of the pastor-teacher relationship, it must be viewed through the grid of relationships.

What are teachers' common complaints about pastors? In a recent discussion with a conference superintendent of education, he listed five common criticisms:

1. Lack of sympathy for the plight of teachers who must answer to the principal, parents, pastor, board members, church members, and superintendent. Failure to recognize that the teacher cannot be all things to all parties.

2. Failure to see the teacher as a worker and team member.

3. Communicating with the teacher only when there is a problem; failing to praise when appropriate.

4. Lack of understanding about what is going on in the church school, and in some cases, viewing the school as a financial liability.

5. Failure to understand that teachers have problems outside the classroom, and that they need pastoral nurturing like any other member.

Clearly, broken relationships are at the root of every one of these complaints. Heal the broken relationships and the pastor-teacher problem is solved.

Pastors Look at Teachers

But pastors have some complaints about teachers, too. Here is a list of common complaints:

1. Not supporting the pastor before parents, members, and colleagues.

2. Not supporting church programs by regular attendance and participation.

3. Getting involved with political factions and controversial issues in the church.

4. Demanding pastoral support when in the wrong or when there is poor performance on the job.

5. Being defensive about pastoral involvement in the school.

Clearly these too are relationship problems, and a good dose of relation-

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ship building could resolve most of these concerns. There is not enough space in this article to address the validity of the complaints. Instead, I will seek to deal with relational problems as teachers and pastors perceive them. What is the source of the complaints? What is the major irritant that keeps the sores from healing? What keeps causing the breakdown in relationships? These questions can penetrate beneath the surface to uncover the real problems.

Both pastor and teacher are part of an organization. Both function within its policies and structure; thus both are affected by the organization. We therefore must ask what part, if any, do policy and structure play in the breakdown of relationships between teacher and pastor?

Examining organization policies and structure is not disloyal or even necessarily critical, but simply offers a place to start in resolving problems. Organizations, by their very nature, offer benefits and negative side-effects.

A major side-effect of Adventist

church organization is setting up pastors and teachers for conflict. In most systems, the chain of command works to minimize conflict in communication and breakdowns in relationships. But within the church structure, pastors and teachers are placed on a direct collision course. Policy clearly indicates that the pastor is not the teacher's immediate supervisor. However, because the school is in his district, and is supported by his congregation, he is often placed in the position of immediate supervisor. This can and does cause misunderstandings between pastors and teachers. This happens more frequently in the single church-single school setting.

Another built-in friction is the hierarchical mind-set of organization. Hierarchy places emphasis on tiers and position, which sees the pastor as being located on a higher tier than the teacher. In the hierarchical mind-set, teachers' and pastors' paychecks might come from the same office, but this does not mean they are on the same team. The teachers are on the B team, and the pastors are on the A team. This naturally causes rifts between pastors and teachers. I have heard many teachers say they don't feel a part of the team. The truth of the matter is that we are all working for the same objective—the saving of souls.

In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, "other foundation can no man lay than that is

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laid, which is Jesus Christ.” “It was the good pleasure of the Father that in Him should all the fullness dwell.”³

There are no tiers in the work of God. The mission of the teacher and the pastor is “to seek and save those that are lost.” Function, roles, and responsibilities are different, but both are on the same team.

Obviously, these built-in stressors are the root of problems between pastors and teachers. But they need not cause broken relationships. By identifying the problem, we can develop solutions that bypass the built-in problems.

If teachers expect to build good relationships with pastors, they must take the initiative. Hurt feelings must be cast aside, and the mission of Christ must take priority. We know from experience what broken relationships do to the church school; therefore, we should be quick to try to heal broken relationships with pastors. Of course, the pastor has a responsibility to build the relationship, too, but our children are too precious for us to play the waiting game. As you step forward to take the initiative, here are some suggestions to build a good relationship with your pastor:

1. Be confident about your position on the team. Let your pastor know that you are happy to be on the team with him. Then act at all times as though you really are a part of the team.
2. Don’t allow members to pit you against the pastor.
3. Be not only a devoted teacher, but also an efficient teacher. It is much easier for the pastor to see you as part of the team when you are doing a good job.
4. Encourage the pastor to come by for a pastoral visit. Don’t be afraid to ask him for counsel.

5. Invite the pastor to present devotionals for your classroom, and to become involved with school activities.

6. Remember your pastor in prayer daily.

7. Always talk positively about your pastor. In building a relationship with your pastor, you are building a bridge to his or her heart. Thompson sums it up well:

What is the purpose of a bridge? It is a structure that makes crossing over from one side to another possible. To us as Christians, building a bridge is building a relationship that lets us cross over into the world of another. Then when we have crossed over into his world, he feels safe. Then he in turn, will cross over into our world. It is a continual process. It is the process that makes a relationship.¹

Building good relationships between pastors and teachers won't cure every church school problem, but it will pay high dividends. ²

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REFERENCES

1. W. Oscar Thompson, *Concentric Circles of Concern* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), p. 13.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952), p. 50.
 4. Thompson, p. 131.
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