

The Mission School: Catalyst or Catastrophe?

An analysis of the perils and possibilities of Adventist mission schools in India

The concept of "mission schools" has on occasion received considerable criticism, primarily because these schools enroll mostly non-Adventist students and because a number of them employ non-Adventist teachers. The following article is an affirmation of the power of these schools to serve as a witness to Christian values and concerns and as a source of high-quality Adventist education.

Early on, the church made the commitment to establish an Adventist presence in every major Indian town and city.

but has also taught him Christian values. These values come not just from Binoy's Bible classes, but also from the overriding Adventist atmosphere of the school. Binoy's grandfather has come to tell me how much he owes to Adventist education, and to ask if he can buy any literature that would help Binoy even more.

Binoy is just one of the more than 100,000 boys and girls studying in some 250 mission schools* operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in India. It is the largest Protestant parochial system in the country. Though barely 30 years old, the enrollment grows so rapidly each year that it threatens to strain the resources of the church. In 1982, there were about 54,000 students enrolled in Indian mission schools. Today this figure has doubled. However, the church-operated school system in India has often triggered questions from critics and admirers both within and outside the church. The questions fall into three areas: philosophy, ecclesiology, and missiology.

There is a gentle knock at my office door. I look up and see a total stranger, tall, slim, and stately. With a smile he steps into my office, and takes over—not just the conversation, but my total interest. He has travelled more than a thousand miles to see me in my office as education director of the Southern Asia Division.

Mr. Ghosh is a textile merchant. At first the only common factor I can see between his business and mine is that thousands of children in our schools use a lot of textiles for their school uniforms. But that's not why

he wants to see me. He wants to talk about his grandson, a third-grade student at our school in Calcutta. For four years little Binoy has attended our school. And the school has changed him so much. He has learned the meaning of sharing and kindness. He can control his temper tantrums. He talks about helping others. More than his good grades, the growth in Binoy's character is what has impressed his family.

What had happened? Binoy's Adventist education has given him not only an excellent academic background,

Philosophy

When D. R. Watts, a visionary missionary, developed plans for Adventists to

BY JOHN M. FOWLER

impact the educational scene of South India, he had only one idea in mind: the incarnational model of Jesus—Go where the people are, and give them something they need.

In the 1960s the mission school program began in earnest in the South India Union. Early on, the church made the commitment to establish an Adventist presence in every major town and city. With this in mind, it began a sustained effort to reach the community with an education that would transform values, life-style, and the church's outreach.

My 10 years of educational administration at the division level gave me an opportunity to visit most of India's mission schools. At every visit, the first question almost always centered around the philosophy of the institution. Invariably the answer was the same: From the foothills of the Himalayas to the palm beaches of the south, from the sweltering heat of Bombay to the cool valleys of the northeast, something unified the Adventist school system—its philosophy.

The same quote was not only displayed in the school bulletins, but also became the commanding purpose of the institutions. And what was this quote? It was from Ellen G. White: "It [education] is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come." (*Education*, p. 13.)

How is such a philosophy expressed in practice? How does commitment to Christian values come through in a classroom that has 99 percent non-Christian students? How does Christ move from a mystery to a real person in an environment of academic pressure, societal priorities, secularism, and often an indifference to the Christian worldview? How does the Word become an integrating factor when the curriculum

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Students and teachers from the SDA Higher Secondary School at Roorkee. Located in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, close to the capital city of Delhi, it has the best physical plant of any Adventist school in the Southern Asia Division and a reputation for strong discipline and community building.

is commanded by other factors not entirely under the school's control?

These questions have puzzled Adventist educators in India, as elsewhere. There is no easy solution. The Bible class does not provide the entire answer. Church administration may not be able to help much. G. J. Christo, a long-time church leader who has administered the school system at the mission, union, and division levels, says:

"The teacher is the key. With a teacher who knows Jesus, the transmission of Jesus could not be a problem."

Thank God for teachers who know Jesus. It is because of them that there are changed lives like Binoy's. The Bible class plays a crucial role in nurturing values and helping students discover Jesus as their Saviour and Friend. The concept of God projected by the

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Prayer band during week of prayer at E. D. Thomas Higher Secondary School, in the southern part of Tamil Nadu, near the Bay of Bengal. Named after the first Indian ordained minister and pioneer worker, this school is the premier secondary Adventist institution in India. Its high spiritual profile and excellence in academics draw students from all over the country for pre-university and pre-professional courses. More than 90 percent of its students pass the public examinations.

Bible class can make a difference in the life of a growing child.

I remember Saro, a 10th grader, who wrote an essay for her English examinations describing what she liked most about her Adventist school. She came from a community that defined one's status strictly in terms of caste. She had known God only as a harsh arbiter, and life as a cosmic accident in an endless cycle with neither beginning nor end.

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From the foothills of the Himalayas to the palm beaches of the south, from the sweltering heat of Bombay to the cool valleys of the northeast, something unifies the Adventist school system—its philosophy.

Administrative block, Lowry Memorial Junior College, in the south India garden city of Bangalore. Established in 1915, this is the oldest Adventist secondary school in Southern Asia. It has 2,054 students, of whom only 315 are Seventh-day Adventists.

But ever since she had begun to attend the Adventist school in seventh grade, her worldview had begun to change. The ideals of a universal brotherhood defined by the law of love, a loving God who cared enough to send His Son to die on the cross, a rich and responsible life governed by the demands of time and eternity began to challenge her thinking. “That change in life’s perspective and outlook is what I like the most about the Adventist school,” Saro wrote. “I have learnt to love God, and to know that He cares for me.”

That kind of transformation is not always measurable in terms of the baptismal pond. But Christian education changes lives, influences character development, and sows seeds that lead to a harvest that will become clear only at the judgment.

Ecclesiology

The mission schools’ rapid growth has impacted the church in two areas: its structure and mission.

India’s mission schools have affected the dynamics of church structure in the areas of personnel, power, and finance. School personnel outnumber all other church workers by a ratio of roughly two to one. We have more teachers

than pastors. Principals of large institutions have more personnel to supervise, larger budgets to administer, and greater growth projections to monitor than some local mission presidents. Such power carries with it the temptation to assert organizational independence. But this has not happened because of the ecclesiology that governs the mission school.

“What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” thundered Tertullian when he foresaw the possible results of the early church and its catechetical schools fellowshiping with Hellenism. This fear is real whenever Christianity collides with opposing concerns. The mission school is no stranger to this danger, which often appears in an either/or threat: Either the church loses its schools to secularism or the school dominates the church to the extent that the church loses its vision and mission. This has happened in numerous non-Adventist situations. But Adventists in India have escaped this danger, at least up to now. This is a tribute to both a sound ecclesiology and a vibrant educational system that works within the structure of the church.

How does this ecclesiological relationship preserve the vision of the

church and the function of the mission school? The mission school has deliberately chosen to function as a servant of the church. The academic excellence, financial independence, contribution to community growth, public reputation, and influence gained over the years are seen by the schools as being derived from their commitment to the purposes of God and as meant to extend His kingdom. This has helped them maintain a kingdom-perspective.

Such a perspective is more easily stated than achieved, and in this area the church faces one of its most arduous challenges. If the schools have to carry on their kingdom-perspective in an alien atmosphere, and if the teachers are the instruments through which integration of faith takes place in the classroom, then where does one get the personnel to accomplish that task? Can the church equip, train, motivate, and commandeer an adequate army of teachers and administrators? Building an Adventist-trained educational service corps remains a challenge. Meanwhile, there is the problem of keeping the mission in the mission school.

Missiology

What keeps the Adventist mission school going and growing is its sense of

mission. If philosophy distinguishes it from other types of education, if the church provides the kingdom-perspective, it is in mission that the school finds its reason for existence.

From the city of Madurai, South India, which has the largest Adventist mission school population in the world (nearly 5,000 students), to the smallest school in northeast India, a binding sense of mission pervades the school system. Worldwide Global Mission is only three years old, but for nearly 30 years now the Adventist church in India has seen in the mission school a viable way to establish an Adventist presence in the great population centers of the country. The concrete jungles as well as the little towns, the cities as well as the forgotten villages have a definite Adventist influence because of our mission schools.

And this is no nominal presence. Our schools have become catalysts for social change and community dynamics. Students of our schools have become leaders in commerce, banking, politics, administration, and education. Who can measure the influence of one such person? The good will and the doors opened for the church and the school are enormous.

This does not mean that the mission school does not have its problems. The journey is far from over. There are bridges to cross, mountains to climb. Insufficient facilities, inadequate Adventist staffing, lack of Bible teachers, weakness in integration of faith and learning, administrative failures, and philosophic bungling are all challenges to be faced in the arduous journey of Adventist mission schools. But the vision persists. And where there is vision, surely the people of God will triumph. ✍

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* "Mission school" denotes an Adventist-operated community school where the enrollment is largely non-Adventist. In India the term commonly used is "day school."

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Boys and girls heading for their physical-education class at Raymond Memorial Higher Secondary School at Jalpaiguri, in the northeastern state of West Bengal.

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Adventist schools in India are involved in social change and development. Temperance rallies and environmental awareness programs are part of the school program, even in small towns and villages. In the picture above, students are participating in a city-cleaning rally in south India.