

CHURCH LEADERS SELECT PRIORITIES FOR EDUCATION

A Survey of Delegates at the GC Session in Utrecht

Adventist education is big business! The latest available statistical report from the General Conference (1995) revealed that, worldwide, we support 88 colleges and universities, 931 secondary schools and worker training institutes, and 4,385 elementary schools. We employ 45,614 teachers and 15,451 other personnel to educate 906,715 students.

Since these schools are operated by many different entities, it is difficult to determine precisely what all this costs, but the annual operating expenses run into the hundreds of millions of dollars. Since contributions to the mission of the church are finite, education competes with other areas such as evangelism, administration, nurture, media, and compassion ministries. This is particularly true in times of recession or stagnation, such as we have been experiencing in recent years.

Competition for limited resources requires naming priorities. The opportunity to do this was given to the delegates attending the 1995 General Conference Session held in Utrecht, Netherlands. Traditionally, the principal duties of the session are to elect officers and other leaders, to hear re-

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ports from the various entities that comprise the church, and to transact other business, such as changes in the constitution and by-laws and policy revisions in the *Church Manual*.

However, in planning for the 1995 session, Robert Folkenberg, president of the General Conference, felt that another element should be included. In view of the considerable expense

involved in conducting the session, it seemed prudent to ask this large, representative group of leaders to decide what directions the church should take in this quinquennium.

It was decided to survey the assembled delegates, asking them to indicate their priorities both for emphasis and for financial support during the coming quinquennium. The General Conference officers commissioned a consortium of researchers from Andrews University to conduct this survey.

After consulting with GC officials and several focus groups representing a number of world divisions, the researchers developed a questionnaire that was translated into six languages, sent to the accredited delegates in advance, and collected as they registered for the session. Participation was exceptionally high: Of the 2,341 delegates, 2,011 completed the questionnaires, a response rate of 86 percent.

The survey was lengthy, consisting of nearly 200 items divided into eight areas of church activity plus specific information sections. One of the areas, labeled "Adventist Christian Education," contained 10 items for respondents to prioritize. This article will explore the delegates' opinions about the future of SDA education. But first, we

BY EDWIN I. HERNANDEZ, ROGER L. DUDLEY,
AND DUANE McBRIDE

will provide a demographic profile of the sample, then look briefly at some items relating to Christian education that were included in the areas of “Evangelism and Mission” and “Factors for Unity in the World Church.”

Demographic Profile

Some 81 percent of the delegates were currently employed by the church (the laity representation at the General Conference session was relatively small). The delegates were an extremely well-educated group, with 80 percent having at least a college education and 51 percent having a graduate education. This corroborates other research findings, suggesting that the culture of Adventism and particularly its school system reinforces learning and subsequently affects the educational attainment of its members.

The gender distribution was overwhelmingly male (87 percent), reflecting the fact that most of the leadership positions from the local level on up to the General Conference are held by men. Moreover, while 92 percent of the delegates employed by the church were men, some 52 percent of the women were laity. Even though there were more male than female delegates, in terms of proportions, women delegates were more likely to be lay members.

The age distribution formed a normal curve, with the majority being 45 to 54 years old. About a third of the delegates (29 percent) were less than 45 years of age and employed by the church, suggesting that a significant number of church leaders are young adults. This finding seems to support the fact the Adventist Church worldwide is a very young church.

This sample of delegates represents the decision-making body of the church. While we didn't ask what church office each delegate held, we can assume that the majority are elected leaders from one level or another. Thus, the portrait is of a predominantly middle-aged group of well-educated church employees. Delegates were six times more likely to be men than women.

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Delegates and attendees at the 1995 GC session take a break between meetings.

Evangelism and Mission

The instructions for the Evangelism and Mission section were as follows: “The Seventh-day Adventist Church has limited financial resources to utilize in the various methods of fulfilling its mission. Therefore it is necessary to set priorities for funding. Please assign a priority from 1 to 5 to each method of outreach in the following list where 1 = lowest priority for funds and 5 = highest priority for funds.”

The instructions were followed by a list of 31 items. In order to rank these items, the percentages assigning a “5” to each choice (the highest priority for funding) have been arranged in descending order, with the top seven listed below:

- Train lay members for soul-winning: 50.5 percent
- Global Mission: 49.9 percent
- Personal evangelism in your own

area: 39.3 percent

- Evangelism among non-Christians: 36.9 percent

- Use Adventist education to retain children from Seventh-day Adventist families: 31.8 percent

- Public evangelism in your own area: 29.1 percent

- Train parents to transmit Christian values to children: 25.9 percent

Delegates consistently chose the training of laity for soul-winning as a top priority. In addition to being number one overall, it ranked high in each of the 15 geographic regions (11 world divisions, three attached unions, and the General Conference headquarters staff). This emphasis on lay involvement can also be seen in the third item: “personal evangelism in your own area” (much of this presumably conducted by

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Delegates and attendees listen to proceedings of the 1995 GC session.

Delegates from Zaire present their division report at the Utrecht session.

laity). Choices 2 and 4, Global Mission and evangelism among non-Christians, reflect the delegates' desire to extend the preaching of the message beyond the fields in which Adventists have traditionally worked.

Considering that 31 important items were to be rated, two education components did quite well. Adventist education as a means of retaining our children had the fifth highest percentage of 5's (32 percent). Following closely in seventh place (26 percent) and continuing the emphasis on the place of Christian education in our mission was "training parents to transmit Christian values to their children." When the delegates assigned priorities for the mission of the church, they did not forget education. Furthermore, they saw this phase of mission primarily as retention. Rearing our own youth to be solid Adventists is a key component of our work.

Several other education items did not fare as well. Evangelism through Adventist schools ranked 14th (for elementary schools), 16th (for secondary schools), and 17th (for colleges) with 19 percent, 18 percent, and 18 percent, respectively. While this still placed them midway in the list, it shows that the delegates saw the retention and training aspects of Adventist education as more important than its potential to reach out to new converts.

Bible correspondence schools placed 24th, with only 12 percent of delegates

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giving this the highest rating. English language schools came in next to last, with five percent. The bottom of the list contained a cluster of items such as radio evangelism, inter-division workers, ministering to divorced and separated families, ministering to those recovering from substance-abuse problems, and teaching the church's historical position on military service.

Unity in the World Church

The second area of the questionnaire dealt with factors that promote unity in the world church. The instructions read: "The Adventist church is a world church with great diversity among its membership. How can we achieve the unity Christ prayed for? What is the 'glue' that holds us together? The list below contains some possible factors that promote this unity. Please indicate how important each is on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = not essential to unity in the world church,

and 5 = absolutely essential to unity."

The delegates were given 30 items to rate. Two of these involved Adventist education. Our worldwide educational system was ranked 20th, with 23.2 percent saying it was absolutely essential to world unity. General Conference institutions of higher education placed 26th, with only 13.4 percent deeming them absolutely essential to world unity.

The most important factors for holding the world church together, the delegates believed, are not organization, structure, or common practices but *experience and beliefs*. The top three rankings were: (1) faith in Jesus Christ, (2) being filled with the love of Christ, and (3) the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Delegates put the core teachings of mainstream Christianity ahead of denominational specifics. In spite of their diversity in practice, the world church can find unity because the members are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Next in importance were the distinctive Adventist doctrines. In fourth, fifth, and sixth place were a common hope in the Second Advent, the Sabbath, and the 27 fundamental beliefs. Other important factors were a common mission, the writings of Ellen White, our understanding of prophecy and end-time events, a shared vision, and the Sabbath school lessons. The first organizational factors did not appear until number 12 (the *Church Manual*) and number 13 (univer-

sal system of church organization). Thus, while the delegates rated education quite high in relation to the church's mission, they were less certain about its function in holding the church together.

All this sets the stage for the section on Adventist education, where the delegates indicated which tasks should receive the highest priorities.

Prioritizing Adventist Education

In this section, the delegates were given 10 items dealing with education and asked to prioritize them from 1 to 5, with 5 representing "high priority." In the chart below, the items are arranged in descending order, according to the percentage of those who rated them a "high priority."

- Use Christian education to teach the gospel and Adventist beliefs and values to youth: 63.6 percent
- Ensure that the authority of the Bible be integrated into every level of the educational process: 59.6 percent
- Develop programs and/or materials to meet the spiritual needs of Adventist youth in non-Adventist schools, colleges, and universities: 40.8 percent
 - Ensure the academic quality of Christian education: 38.7 percent
 - Ensure that Christian education is accessible to females as well as males and affordable to church members: 37.8 percent
 - Use Christian education for evangelism: 37.3 percent
 - Ensure that church workers receive increased practical training to complement their professional training: 37.2 percent
- Hold Adventist educational institutions accountable to church membership/leadership for the impact of their teaching on the students' Christian beliefs and spiritual growth: 31.8 percent
 - Increase the training of church leaders in the uses of new technologies to facilitate communication and administrative effectiveness: 26.5 percent
 - Provide facilities and a faculty that make significant world-recognized contributions to science, learning, and service: 17.8 percent

Christian education has always been seen as an integral part of the Adventist Church's mission. The findings from this section reveal that the delegates' strong-

est desire (64 percent) was to continue to see Christian education as the context in which to teach youth about the gospel and Adventist beliefs and values.

Second, the authority of the Bible was seen as needing to be integrated into every level of the educational process (60 percent). This could include curriculum, teaching approaches, and commitment, as well as the general culture of various institutions. Surprisingly, the third priority (41 percent) was

technologies to facilitate communication and administrative effectiveness (27 percent), and (3) holding Adventist educational institutions accountable to church membership/leadership for the impact of their teaching on students' Christian beliefs and spiritual growth (32 percent).

It is clear from these findings that delegates want our schools to primarily be centers for instilling the Adventist faith and transmitting values, faith, and a clearer understanding of the gospel. In terms of priorities, mission won out over

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A panoramic view of the 1995 GC session in Utrecht.

to develop programs and/or materials to meet the spiritual needs of denominational youth in non-Adventist schools, colleges, and universities. In the past, Adventists have invested huge sums in their own parochial system but have largely neglected the significant portion of their youth attending other schools. Now two-fifths of the world leadership believe the latter should be a high priority.

At the other end of the scale, the three items with the lowest priorities were: (1) providing facilities and faculty that make significant world-recognized contributions to science, learning, and service (18 percent); (2) increasing the training of church leaders on the uses of new

recognition and reputation. Also significant was the emphasis placed on the authority of Scripture at all levels. Making the Bible relevant and integrating its insights into the life, curriculum (humanities, sciences, arts), and overall culture of each institution is a distinguishing mark of an Adventist institution.

Also important in the findings was the recognition that many Adventist youth are not attending church institutions, so the church needs to develop programs and materials to meet their spiritual needs. We know from experience and current research that the cost of Adventist education is becoming a barrier for many church

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A Romanian group waves flags during their division report in Utrecht.

members, particularly recent converts from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Most interesting was the low priority given to holding educational institutions accountable to church membership and leadership on the impact of their teachings. This finding suggests that Adventist delegates are hesitant to institute mechanisms to hold institutions or educators accountable for ensuring that orthodoxy be taught or that Adventist life-styles be followed. Perhaps the delegates felt that such efforts, while important, should not consume church resources or the time and efforts of leadership. Moreover, delegates may feel that putting more emphasis on the value-transmitting function of education and ensuring the authority of Scripture will ensure accountability without creating a “Big Brother” approach to policing orthodoxy.

Demographics

Analyzing findings in this area by gender, employment status, and age revealed some interesting differences.

1. Women were more likely than men to want to guarantee the quality of Christian education and to ensure accessibility for all, particularly church members.
2. Women were also less likely to want to hold Adventist educational insti-

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tutions accountable to church members or leaders for the impact of their teaching on students’ Christian beliefs and spiritual growth.

3. Church employees were more likely than lay delegates to want Christian education to be accessible to women as well as men and to be affordable for church members.

4. Church employees were more likely to want to ensure that the authority of the Bible be integrated into every level of the educational process and to want practical training to complement the professional training of church workers.

5. The only difference across the generations was that younger delegates were less likely than older ones to put a high priority on holding Adventist educational institutions accountable to church membership/leadership for the impact of their

teaching on students’ Christian beliefs and spiritual growth.

Conclusions

There is overall good news for the Adventist educational system. The 1995 General Conference Delegate Survey results reaffirm the mission of Adventist education and call for maintaining a keen awareness of its goal of evangelizing and upholding high standards for the role of Scripture, values, and mission.

There is also strong support for upholding and integrating the authority of the Scriptures throughout the entire educational structure. This key priority should receive serious attention. Christian education encompasses more than adding a Bible class to the curriculum. It requires integrating the values, truth, and stories of the biblical imagination into all subject matter, bringing relevancy and a sense of adventure to the search for knowledge. At the very core of delegate priorities was the need to make our educational institutions explicitly Christian and unabashedly Adventist.

Because more of our youth are seeking education outside the church, delegates are increasingly interested in finding ways to meet the spiritual needs of such students. This does not imply declining support for Adventist education. Instead, it reflects the reality that as increasing numbers seek education outside, such students need spiritual contact and community. This situation will become more and more the norm. Facing it creatively and forthrightly will help bridge the growing gap between those who can obtain Christian education and those who cannot. Recent research has clearly demonstrated that Christian education makes a positive impact on the integration of values, denominational loyalty, and faith maturity of young people. How to achieve these goals when the majority don’t attend our schools will demand more from the family and the church. Creative programming and resources will be needed to address this important concern.

It also seems clear that the delegates did not place a high priority on making educational institutions accountable to church membership and leadership. This

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GC leaders on the podium at the 1995 session.

does not suggest that delegates didn't want educational institutions to live up to the expectations of the church. Rather, it probably indicates that they wanted to emphasize purpose and mission and to ensure the authority of Scripture, rather than to actively seek to make institutions accountable through more drastic means such as purging less-committed workers.

There were some definite differences between the genders. Women were more likely to place a higher priority on improving the quality of education and to making Christian education accessible to all and less likely to hold educators and institutions accountable. These trends reflect the fact that women around the world have less access to quality educational opportunities. Schooling is one of the primary mechanisms for social mobility and self-empowerment. Emphasizing access to good-quality education could be an important initiative for women in and outside the church.

Finally, delegates not employed by the church were interested in making education more accessible but less concerned about ensuring that the authority of the Bible be integrated into every level of the educational process. In contrast, church employees were more likely to

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desire integration of Scriptures into the educational process.

It is important to remember that General Conference delegates are not necessarily typical of the average church member. They represent the decision-making body of the church—a predominantly middle-age, well-educated group of men who are employed by the church. However, because these leaders serve the church at all levels, they will have a major influence on the course of Adventist education in the coming quinquennium.

The *raison d'être* of Adventist education, as viewed by the delegates, is to enhance the distinctive features that make our education both Adventist and Christian—to help it transmit values, integrate biblical truths into the whole curriculum, and function as an integral part of the

A delegate listens to a translation of GC session proceedings.

church's mission. Church leaders are looking for institutions whose vision and mission will shape the religious imagination and commitment of young people, while at the same time infusing them with a passion for excellence as they search for God's truths and prepare to serve humanity. ✍

At the time this article was written, Edwin I. Hernandez, Ph.D., was Associate Professor of Sociology at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. He has recently accepted a call to be Academic Vice-President at Antillean University in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. Roger L. Dudley, Ed.D., is Director of the Institute of Church Ministry and Professor of Church Ministry at Andrews University. Duane McBride, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at Andrews University.