

REKINDLING COMMITMENT AND LOYALTY WITHIN ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION

BY LYN BARTLETT

Commitment and loyalty are both essential ingredients for maintaining Adventist higher education into the next century. Yet in recent times, both elements have been hotly debated by church leadership and laity alike. Leadership, preoccupied with the complexities of guiding a world church, sometimes fails to appreciate the parallel challenge of sponsoring higher education. Similarly, some lay members, based on outrageous anecdotes circulating through the “Adventist grapevine,” think church academics are straying from the tenets of Adventism. While proud of the foundational base of SDA higher education, many Adventists are concerned that the original vision has become (to put it politely) blurred.

Re-igniting the Vision

In such an entangled milieu, communication breaks down, trust erodes, and commitment and loyalty are called into question. It is time to re-ignite the vision of SDA higher education.

In many respects, concern about the supposed state of our colleges and universities can be traced to the changing nature of Adventism. Current leaders face immense challenges in managing an increasingly pluralistic and diverse global church. Adventists can no longer be assumed to exhibit the sameness in dogma or life-style as they once did. Indeed, Adventism cannot claim immunity from the complex problems of other international corporate entities, despite its heavenly calling.

Reasons to Be Optimistic

But there is hope, even in the midst of apparent gloom. We

can find plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the future of Adventist higher education. This optimism comes from three sources:

1. *The vast literature on leadership, management, and organizational behavior.* Even a cursory study of this research reveals deep concern about “a crisis of the spirit” within 1990s organizations.¹ A lack of both external support and internal confidence plagues many organizations. Merger mania, the rapid advance of new technology, and the intensified pressure of international market forces—all are factors that individuals and

organizations must learn to live with. Downsizing, the torment of the decade, is now seen as effective only if organizations eventually “right size.” These changes cause tremendous upheaval, threatening stable corporations with takeover or collapse. The resulting stress on employees and stockholders causes too many to feel betrayed by and to lose faith in their organizations.

Despite these problems, the corporate world has demonstrated remarkable revitalization in recent years. *Fortune* magazine lists Wal-Mart, Levi Strauss, 3M, Corning, Johnson & Johnson, and Harley-Davidson as among the most admired companies² because of their success in dealing with change, positive relationships with employees, innovation, and profitability. These companies have made the paradigm shift away from the traditional hierarchical organization model; they have maintained the respect of their employees even while “right sizing.” New terminology such as *partnerships*, *teamwork*, and *collaboration* have been embraced by organizations with this philosophy. They have emerged as empowered fraternities in which control has given way to commitment and people “want

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to” rather than “have to” come to work. In such corporations, management and employees are empowered to seek and embrace change. Higher education may be one of the last bastions to move in this direction; nonetheless, change is on the horizon. Adventist higher education is fortunate that the church’s organiza-

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tional structures are small and uncomplicated enough to allow for a relatively painless yet dramatic transformation.

2. *Another reason to be optimistic about the future of Adventist higher education comes from the growing body of research on church-related colleges and universities*, which offers numerous examples of “resiliency” among Christian colleges. The United States has approximately 3,500 institutions of higher education, about 700 (or 20 percent) of which maintain some linkage to a specific denomination. Morris-Olson’s re-

cent research depicted Christ-centered institutions as particularly vulnerable in the 1990s, since most are obscure, possess limited resources, and pursue a narrow mission.³ Such institutions lack funding for capital improvements, face uncertain enrollment trends, and struggle with cost containment amid demands for increased technology and other program needs. Few of these institutions can live within their means and many face financial crises, if not bankruptcy in the near future.

The good news is that church-related

colleges and universities can adapt to the pressures of changing environments and achieve success. In 1985, Hubbard identified the following characteristics of thriving church-related colleges:⁴

- Clear identity and distinct educational goals and mission;
- Loyal and vocal alumni;
- Powerful religious commitments;
- Active and involved trustees;
- Effective leadership;
- A “good” story and an effective means for communicating it; and
- Intense denominational support.

Morris-Olson concluded that the resiliency of successful church-related institutions cannot be attributed to any single strategy or institutional characteristic. More important is to sustain over time a broad overall focus and clearly defined goals. Such institutions must not focus exclusively on cutting back and preserving resources. Without a concurrent growth strategy, they can expect demoralized employees and students, as well as decreasing constituency and financial support.

Successful church-related colleges and universities put into practice the findings of Peters and Waterman that “the effective organization stays close to its customers.”⁵ This means that administrators of Christian colleges and universities must foster a campus culture where the needs of the students are met, faculty and staff feel supported and appreciated, and the church constituency can feel proud of “their” school!

3. *The final reason for confidence in the future of Adventist higher education comes from the very strengths and weaknesses of these schools.* The North American Division has some 14 institutions of higher learning. Other world divisions have far fewer; usually one or two institutions valiantly serving the needs of the church in diverse circumstances. Whether it be Newbold College in Britain, Japan Missionary College in Japan, Helderberg College in South Africa, Montemorelos University in Mexico, Antillian Adventist University in Puerto Rico, or River Plate Adventist University in Argentina; these and other Adventist colleges and universities illustrate the impressive diversity of SDA higher education throughout the world.

However, most, if not all, are tuition-driven and dependent on church monies rather than endowments or state funding.

This loose fraternity of SDA higher education has always kept the Adventist subculture homogeneous. The church's promotion of the triad of home, church, and school from birth until adulthood has served to maintain lifelong commitment and loyalty to the church. But since the 1960s, the encroaching influences of postmodernism have wrought havoc upon society, including the church. The lifelong advantages of attending an Adventist college do not seem to be celebrated as much as in the past. A sense of pride in our colleges and universities appears to be lacking. In fact, the gap between the "town" (that is, the church pew) and "gown" may be widening. Is it surprising, then, that confidence and communication break down, and that commitment and loyalty suffer?

An Aloof Ivory Tower?

Adventist academe is seen by many of its constituents as an ivory tower; somewhat aloof from the concerns of people in the pew. On the other side, many faculty think that too many church members are rigidly inflexible and unaware of the complexities of offering a quality program of Adventist higher education.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that internal threats endanger the viability of our colleges and universities more than any external menace. Perception is often worse than reality, and half-truths can easily become malicious rumors. I well remember when constant rain caused flooding at Avondale College, and several cows from the college dairy escaped from their enclosure. A concerned alumnus called from Perth (some 3,000 miles away) after hearing that the entire herd had drowned! Other rumors about happenings on Adventist campuses are far less kind. We too readily label those who disagree with us, causing distrust and a sapping of commitment and loyalty. It's time to cease the fruitless arguments that divide our loyalties and consume our energies.

Of late, few church leaders have said much about their support for Adventist higher education. However, the subject

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is beginning to get some attention. A recent General Conference document calling for a return to greater spirituality within all levels of Adventism was presented at the Annual Council in Costa Rica this past October.⁶ In late January, General Conference leadership met with the North American Division college and university presidents to discuss the matter. On March 19-21, 1997, 115 college and university presidents, board chairs, and other interested persons from around the world met for a higher education summit in Loma Linda, California. Ultimately, good will come from these discussions. While improved spirituality can never be mandated from above, the survival of Adventist campuses certainly depends on their spiritual ethos and the degree to which they adhere to the principles of Adventism. I am reminded of the sound advice given me years ago by a state education official: "Unless Adventist education can demonstrate that it is different from the state, then it has no right to exist." Strong words perhaps, but true beyond question.

Our Greatest Strength

Perhaps the greatest strength of Adventist higher education is found in its commitment to understanding (and then implementing) the gospel of Jesus Christ. To be in partnership with the Holy Spirit in the celestial work of character transformation is an awesome privilege and responsibility. This energizes both the individual and the institution for greater service. Such empowerment re-

solves the issues of commitment and loyalty, and creates a climate that promotes mental and physical health. It inspires teachers and students to make a difference in a hurting world.

To be sure, Adventism needs its colleges and universities to be proactive in creating change, not merely reactive. For this to occur, all campus employees must renew their commitment to the unique mission of Adventist higher education and their personal role in that mission. This is no time for business as usual. Remaining static as a not-for-profit organization means risking being out of business in the near future.

Thus, as a new century approaches, the calling (not the command) of Adventist higher education is for humble renewal. Administrators, faculty, support staff, boards of trustees, church leaders, students and church members all have the privilege of renewing their commitment and loyalty to our colleges and universities.

Our students are our church of tomorrow. Our faculty have the potential to become even greater change agents for the gospel. For Adventist higher education, the best is yet to be. Imagine the possibilities! ✍

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