

WHAT'S A NICE CHURCH LIKE OURS DOING IN THE EDUCATION BUSINESS?

BY ALFRED McCLURE

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I've called this article, "What's a Nice Church Like Ours Doing in the Education Business?" Life would be a whole lot less complicated for many of us if we weren't. Some of us would live longer and would have a whole lot more money in the bank if we weren't.

Adventist education is incredibly expensive. Yes, I've seen the bumper sticker that says, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." But I also know that it costs less to attend a community college than to attend Andrews University or most of our other colleges. In 1995, the unions in the North American Division sent nearly \$23 million to their colleges. That does not include tuition, gifts, or support from alumni.

Let me refresh your memory about some things most of you know already. . .

- Aside from pastoral salaries, education is the largest single item in most conference budgets. In a 1992 study, we learned that the average percentage of equivalent tithe

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- Adventist education absorbs copious amounts of time. It is not possible to calculate the time spent on the boards, faculty senates, finance committees, budget committees, discipline committees, master planning committees, self-study committees, curriculum committees, tenure committees, personnel committees, lyceum planning committees, alumni committees, marketing committees, and departmental staff meetings. And that does not include secondary, elementary, and even preschool. Added together, that represents an *enormous number of Adventist hours*—every school year.

Adventist education is expensive.

So what's a nice church like ours doing in the education business?

spent on K-16 education by the conferences in North America amounts to 20.3 percent of gross tithe collected. It is an even higher percentage of the actual conference budget.

- It is not uncommon to hear from our members, and sometimes from our employees, "Well, if we just didn't spend so much money on evangelism, but rather on educating our kids, we'd keep a lot more of them!" It is true that local conferences allocate thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for evangelism—but they invest *millions* each year in Christian education (which has indeed proven to be one of the church's most effective forms

of evangelism).

- The cost of education represents a financial ordeal for some local churches. Although some congregations give no support at all to Adventist education, for the majority of our churches, it is the largest single local expense. The average runs from 33 percent to 50 percent of local funds; in some cases, it represents much more.

- Some families go into major debt to get their children through school. I know a family in Dayton, Ohio, who had their home nearly paid for, but who put a huge mortgage on it to get their two youngsters through an Adventist college.

Most of you know as well as I the story of how our first official school was born. You probably remember the teacher and the place—Goodloe Harper Bell at Battle Creek. Ellen White, the church's prophetess, made strong statements about establishing Adventist schools. During our more than a century of emphasis on Christian education, we have carried out her prophetic mandate. Were we to give it up, we would have to argue that she didn't know what she was talking about or that we have a better way today—that the public schools and colleges really are better and safer now than during her time. In her unequivocal way, Ellen White urged *every local church* to have a school for its children.

But do you remember the year our first official school was organized? 1872. While several Adventist families had conducted unofficial home school experiments for various groups of children, it was 28 years *after* the Great

Disappointment—and nearly a decade after the church had been officially organized and named—before we organized a school.

Not that it hadn't been the subject of heated debate. Those who argued against it reasoned that there was no time. Every resource of the church needed to focus on the task of telling the world that Jesus was coming soon. (It's interesting that these spiritual lumberjacks didn't want to take time to sharpen their saws.)

And the rationale that won the day? We *must* have schools to prepare “workers”—pastors, teachers, nurses, missionaries, and later, doctors. I am convinced that when history records the defining moments of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the decision to establish schools will be seen as one of the most dramatic.

When the role of the graduates was so focused and definable, it was not difficult to hire faculty who shared the passion of training “workers.” The faculty, after all, was drawn from the ranks of “workers.”

A New Dynamic

But over time, we felt the need to include liberal arts. The church couldn't hire all of the schools' graduates. And our demographics were changing. No longer were we only teachers, preachers, nurses, and doctors. New professions were being born in business, transportation, and eventually technology. When that happened, it opened up a whole new educational dynamic. A different kind of student began to enroll. The teacher's task broadened—and more often included leading the students to Christ. We moved from training of only church workers to training each student to be a good Adventist in whatever profession he or she might enter.

The educational level of teachers became of greater concern because we were educating a wide variety of professionals to compete in the marketplace.

When we hire a successful *pastor* to teach *preachers*, it usually isn't difficult to remember to say, “One of your goals will be to train the students to be soul-winners.” However, when you are hiring engineering teachers, for instance, it is not as automatic to include that line in the interview process.

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When you hire a teacher from an Adventist college where the educational process has been unashamedly focused on the mission of the church, you may well end up with a teacher with a different perspective than one who is hired from the University of Minnesota to teach history.

Let me illustrate. The American Civil War takes on a whole different perspective when you have read Ellen White's description of seeing an angel intervene at Manassas, Virginia, to turn back the Southern armies (*Review and Herald*, August 27, 1861). There is a good chance you don't pick up that particular insight from the history department at the University of Minnesota.

What were the implications of our broader entrance into the field of education? In order to maintain accreditation and make it possible for our students to go on to graduate schools, we began to send a generation of teachers away for advanced degrees. I am not suggesting this was inappropriate. I suspect it was essential.

However, an interesting—and predictable—thing happened. Many of

them returned to our classrooms with their faith deepened from defending it in non-Christian environments. Others returned, not having had their faith *compromised, but with the motivation to emphasize our uniqueness just a bit diluted.*

There is an old adage in education that says, "Most teachers do not teach as they were taught to teach, they teach as they were taught." Perhaps that is what happened in this case. There was a subtle shift in emphasis in some classrooms—at first a *barely perceptible, inadvertent neglect.*

Nurturing the Culture

Charles Bradford, former North American Division president, used to talk about "nurturing the culture." That is a key concept. Adventism is handed down both by example *and by precept.* As the Christian community does battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil, its members are duty bound to pass on to new converts and to its youth what they have learned. They can default on that responsibility not only by *intention*, but also by *inattention.*

We need to help the new generation to develop their own theological con-

structs. For their beliefs to be truly theirs, they must be led through a process of discovery. But the essence of Adventism is not only taught, it is also *caught.* So what burns in the hearts of our teachers is more critical than what they discovered in writing their dissertations.

We are not simply helping our students learn what is and what is not acceptable conduct on the Sabbath. Rather, we are seeking ways to make sure that the new generation locks onto the same passion as the last one. We are trying to ensure that what is important to us also becomes important to them. We are searching for ways to lead our children to fall in love, unashamedly and unreservedly, with the Saviour who died for them.

We are paying dearly for this process, *but not too much!*

Addressing Students' Needs

While we're talking about the education process, we need to include another essential ingredient. Guy Doud, 1987 U.S. Teacher of the Year, said: "I'm in the kid business." He added: "I don't teach English; I don't teach Literature; I don't teach Debate. I teach *students.*" We must make sure that that is

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our central focus as well. That slight blonde girl over there by the door. What needs does she bring to the Adventist classroom? Those two surly jocks who always sit in the back, obviously bored by the discussion. What are they going to learn about Jesus in this classroom today?

One out of every 10 public school students in the United States comes from a chemically dependent home. One out of every 13 teens has been either sexually or physically abused. Every 70 seconds, a teenager attempts suicide; every 90 minutes, one of them succeeds. Every 30 seconds, an unmarried adolescent girl gets pregnant.

I know, the statistics are not as alarming within the Adventist community—and we praise God for that. But they are worse than we know. And every young person who sits in an Adventist classroom brings his or her own set of needs. Ellen White, whose vision of Christian education stretches all of our horizons, says that the teacher “should see in every student a candidate for immortal honors.” Not just immortal life, but immortal *honors*. So let’s re-

member our central mandate: We don’t teach theology or math or engineering. We teach *students*.

As the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education states:

“To bring [men and women] back into harmony with God, so to elevate and ennoble [their] moral nature that [they] may again reflect the image of the Creator, is the great purpose of all . . . education” (*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 49).

A Tribute

Finally, I want to pay tribute to Adventist higher education. I want to say **thank you** for providing your church with a steady stream of loyal workers for so many generations. Traveling the world field, one realizes the impact of the thousands of missionaries whom our North American colleges have trained. *Without Seventh-day Adventist colleges, I am convinced we would not be a world church today.*

Also, I want to thank you for giving young people from very humble backgrounds a dream of higher aspirations, whether it was working for the church

or representing their religion in many other occupations. Better than any other denomination in the world, Adventists have helped lift the sights of lower-income families to something better. Our colleges have played a major role in that transformation.

Thank you, too, for helping to establish a strong Adventist value system in the lives of so many young people who are not only active in their local churches, but also in their communities. The principles of stewardship many of these students learned from their teachers, parents, and pastors have helped spread the gospel commission to the entire world.

While we struggled through many theological controversies over the years, it was theologians and administrators—trained in Adventist colleges—who helped the church successfully work its way through these challenges.

A Divinely Ordained Investment

Adventist colleges may cost a lot of money, but this is a divinely ordained investment that has made Adventism truly a light in a dark world.

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We need to help the new generation to develop their own theological constructs. For their beliefs to be truly theirs, they must be led through a process of discovery.

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The lives of Adventist youth are shaped in three major settings over which we have some control: the home, the church, and the school. We do our young people an injustice if we fail to use all of those to shape the plant toward the desired tree. It was Kenneth Redhead who first jarred me with the question I believe every teacher—every church worker—must constantly ask: “How much of what I am doing would go right on unchanged if there were no such person as a Holy Spirit?”

like the statement of Oswald Chambers, spoken during a chapel service at the Bible training college in Clapham, England, where he was chaplain. He said, “*The purpose of this College is to get us rightly related to the needs of God*” (quoted in *My Utmost for His Highest*). I wish I had said that. I wish the board chair of every college had that phrase on his or her desk. I wish every university and college president, every faculty member—irrespective of discipline—and every student had that statement emblazoned where they would see it a hundred times a day.

Please note also that it does not say, “To get our *students* rightly related to the needs of God, but rather “to get *us* rightly related to the needs of God.”

Chambers was speaking to students, to faculty, to staff, and to school administrators.

I believe that statement is true of Adventist education, and as long as we

fly under those colors, the Lord will continue to bless. If we ever forget it, then Adventist education *is* too expensive.

When I began, I said that many of us would *live longer* if it were not for Christian education. But because of the influence of our schools, hundreds of thousands of our young people will *live forever*.

Expensive—or Priceless?

I said at the outset that were it not for Adventist schools, many of us would have *more money*. I’m sure all of us would give *everything we own* to make sure our children are with us in the kingdom. Although Adventist education is expensive, it is also priceless.

I also said that were it not for Christian schools, life for many of us would be a whole lot less complicated. However, we do not measure the salvation of our children on the scale of whether it is simple or difficult. We simply pray, “Dear God, please show us how to create an environment where these young people will learn to love You. If You will do that, it would be blasphemous for us to say it was too expensive. Instead, as we stand with them before

Your throne, we will simply say, as we do this morning, “Thank You.” ✍

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