

Church Leaders’ Expectations of Adventist Institutions of Higher Learning

Fifty-six years ago, I was a student at Helderberg College in South Africa. I wanted to serve as a missionary in northern Africa. To do so, I needed to graduate with a major in religion and a minor in education.

One of the prescribed education courses was a study of the book *Education* by Ellen White. There I was confronted with the classic statements about Christian education that are so familiar but bear repeating: “Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It 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.”¹

By Frank Thomas

Again from her pen, “Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God’s ideal for His children. Godliness—godlikeness—is the goal to be reached.”²

In describing our first institution of higher learning, Battle Creek College, she wrote: “The primary object of our college was to afford young men an opportunity to study for the ministry and to prepare young persons of both sexes to become workers in the various branches of the cause.”³

As the church has grown, both in the United States and other countries, the application of the objective outlined above has changed, for the organized church can no longer employ all of its graduates. While our colleges and universities still train “workers in the various branches of the cause,” the focus has shifted to preparing students to find their place in society, to become loyal and supportive church members.

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In harmony with these objectives, the mission statement for Southwestern Adventist University states: “*Southwestern Adventist University is a Seventh-day Adventist institution whose mission is to offer affordable, quality higher education in a Christian environment. The University fosters the development of the whole person through academic, religious, and social programs and is committed to the excellence of its faculty and staff, the strength of the curriculum, the effectiveness of its support services, and the services of its graduates.*”

Charles Bradford, the much-loved past president of the North American Division, used to admonish delegates to Annual Councils and North American Division year-end meetings to “nurture the culture.” By this, he meant that every branch of the church, including higher education, must intentionally seek to maintain Adventist beliefs, practices, and standards.

What Church Leaders Want

In the light of these high ideals and objectives, what do church leaders think Adventist colleges and universities should do for the church?

1. *Our colleges and universities should continually inspire their students to make Christ supreme in their lives.* To this end, our schools should nurture an atmosphere in which prayer, worship, and the study of God’s Word are the norm, not the exception. Students should never feel embarrassed or awkward to engage in spiritual activities, and daily schedules should facilitate rather than inhibit spiritual endeavors.

2. *Academic excellence should be combined with Christian principles.* The pursuit of truth, whether spiritual or scientific, must never lead away from Christ. Here again, adherence to the truths

of God’s Word will reassure students that a Christian philosophy of life is compatible with the academic environment. Ellen White’s comments are instructive. “One sentence of Scripture is of more value than ten thousand of man’s ideas and arguments.”⁷⁴

3. *Our colleges and universities should find ways to promote social, cultural, and emotional growth* in order to enable students to successfully meet life’s responsibilities and challenges. Healthful practices should be an integral part of daily life at school. Students should be encouraged to develop habits of industry, promptness, reliability, and self-reliance.

4. *Adventist colleges should model Christian lifestyles on their campuses.* The area of Adventist lifestyle and standards is probably one of the most perplexing for church leaders, as well as for college and university administrators. The Adventist Church today is greatly affected by the rapidly decaying moral values of society. Years ago, it seemed easier to maintain certain fixed rules and regulations, and some of us were probably quite legalistic in their enforcement. But while times have changed, church administrators still want to be able to walk onto an Adventist campus and recognize it as such. It is disconcerting to observe the dress, deportment, and attitudes toward codes of conduct sometimes seen on our campuses.

5. *Distinctive Adventist beliefs should not be subjugated to concerns about offending non-Adventist students,* especially in such matters as Sabbath observance. Here again, we want to avoid the legalistic approaches of the past while ensuring that our campuses are different on Sabbath than during the week. While church attendance cannot be mandated, it should be abundantly clear to all that the Sabbath is a day of worship. We should try to avoid traveling or scheduling secular appointments that encroach on the sacred hours.

6. *Our colleges and universities should be places where mean-*



Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU) graduates go forth to serve God and humanity.



Miller Hall, Southwestern Adventist University.



Library, Southwestern Adventist University.

ingful and lasting friendships are formed, including those that lead to a lifetime commitment in marriage. Today, when the marriage relationship in society is looked upon so casually, our campuses should provide a wholesome environment for men and women where the highest ideals are upheld. Loose association between the sexes, so pervasive in society, should not be condoned on our campuses.

7. *School faculty and staff members should be fully committed Seventh-day Adventists.* Certainly, there must be room for academic freedom, but this should never exceed the bounds set by Scripture and Adventist philosophy. It is a tragedy for any student to lose his or her hold on Christ because of the doubts raised by a faculty or staff member. Church administrators expect that when faculty or staff members feel they can no longer subscribe to the 27 Fundamental Beliefs, they will do the ethical thing and resign.

8. *While it is essential for them to meet accreditation standards,*

our schools should adhere to the principle laid down by Ellen White that "the Lord never designed that our college should imitate other institutions of learning. The religious element should be the controlling power."⁵

Nurturing and Internalizing

Adventist administrators look to our schools as a primary means to "nurture the culture" and to ensure that the church's beliefs and practices are internalized by our youth. This will prepare them to assume their rightful place in the church, whether as employees or lay members.

We must remember that many famous universities in the United States started out as religious institutions, but over time, they lost their moorings and today have no church affiliation.

Adventist administrators cringe at the thought of this ever happening to any of our institutions. ✍



At the time of the Higher Education Symposium (February 2002), Fred Thomas was serving as President of Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas. He is currently doing accounting for the Southwestern Union Conference Revolving Fund in Burleson, Texas.

REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif. Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 5, p. 60.
4. *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 71.
5. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 14.



SWAU students praying at outdoor church services.