



# Reorganization, Economic Pressures, and Adventist Distinctives

BY BARRY HILL

**T**he 2000 education report for the South Pacific Division (SPD) portrayed an advancing system. As shown by a comparison of student enrollments in 2000 and 2004, the trend continues. Our numbers have grown by more than 5,000, good news indeed. While the system's vigor and innovative spirit continue to manifest themselves, a cluster of challenging issues and developments has also emerged to test our resolve. This report will chart the direction of our recent journey.

## Political Changes

First, the church's political and educational map in the South Pacific changed markedly after 2000, with our five unions being reduced to four. One of our new unions, the Trans Pacific Union Mission (TPUM), combined two unions and must now manage small educational systems in nine countries. Our new Australian Union also combined two unions and acquired a strong education team. The SPD curriculum unit moved to that office, meaning that our division-level team lost two members.

Our most recent innovations go beyond the restructuring of unions. In the past two years, in response to economic hardships, we have obtained more government funding for teacher salaries in Pacific nations. In the Papua New Guinea Union, this resulted in the partial restructuring of our education system to improve accountability and make it easier for us to deal with the government.

## Economic Pressures in the Pacific

Governments in the Pacific Islands region are now controlling education more than before 2000, and they are funding schools better through the use of overseas aid. Meanwhile, faced with the escalating costs of education, the church has steadily withdrawn expatriate budgets and granted more autonomy to local missions. In addition, our tertiary institutions continue to need substantial help. Consequently, many schools are now run by local communities, with lessened financial and professional support from their missions. We are not about to give up on these, and still count them in our statistical report as Advent-

ist schools. However, given these pressures, it has been a challenge to sustain the quality and competitive advantage enjoyed by Adventist schools in the past.

## Adventist Ethos

Much of the SPD system now accepts all or part of its funding for teacher salaries from various national governments. Given the increased control brought about by this funding, our education directors are more committed than ever to identifying the "special character" or ethos of Adventist education and ensuring that school policy and practice reflect it. Schools in Australia and New Zealand are developing inno-



Happy students at Suvavou Primary School in Fiji.

vative chaplaincy programs, and all SPD schools are reaching out through “intentional evangelism” to their non-Adventist students and parents.

Continuing its excellent work from earlier days, the Australian Union Conference Curriculum Unit has produced additional frameworks and other resources to help schools integrate faith throughout the curriculum and cope with curriculum changes demanded by the various states.

Enlightened government policy in New Zealand requires all the Adventist schools in its “integrated” state system to clearly manifest and document their “special character.” It is encouraging to see abundant evidence of this focus in classroom displays, policies, and teacher-student relationships. In the union education office, Lanelle Cobbin has created practical resources for teaching values and developing relationships in schools, and is implementing a systematic program to help teachers use these resources to build faith in all schools. We predict that this kind of work will spread throughout the SPD.

### Developing In-Service Program

The division has always had two economic zones, Australia-New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, which differ markedly in wealth and school quality. Since 2000, our division education office has developed Les Devine’s concept of conducting teacher in-services to link these contrasting zones. SPD Associate Education Director Ken Weslake arranges up to 20 events a year, funded by donors and ADRA Australia’s annual allocation. Local Pacific teachers are taken by plane, truck, or boat to some-



Education faculty, Avondale College, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

what remote centers to hear the presenters, mostly teachers from Australia or New Zealand. Both presenters and attendees receive a blessing.

The Australian Union has started a successful program to prepare and induct its new principals through annual seminars. In order to develop system leadership, the SPD has run annual conferences for current principals of the Australian and New Zealand unions, and

seminars to help Pacific Island principals master the basics of running an Adventist school.

### Development of Larger Schools

In Australia, there has been a trend toward establishing K-12 schools, with their attendant complexities. In fact, five of the 55 Australian schools now enroll almost 40 percent of that system’s students.

New Zealand’s schools continue to grow, but are limited in size by state regulations—a trade-off for government subsidies. In the Pacific unions, a handful of urban schools are growing quite large, as are a few schools in rural areas with strong community support.

Accompanying this growth has been a significant increase in the number of non-Adventist students enrolled. While more pronounced in Australia and New Zealand, this trend is evident throughout the divi-

sion. Consequently, teachers who join our system with no Adventist undergraduate teaching preparation or experience in denominational schools are now inducted into an understanding of “Adventist distinctives” in regional seminars early in the school year.

### Quality Assurance

We appreciate the professional help of the General Conference in accredit-



Fulton College, Suva, Fiji.



Fiji elementary students enjoy the personalized attention in their classroom.

ing our tertiary institutions. At all levels in the SPD, our school accreditation process continues to support quality assurance, and Adventist Schools Australia (the formal name of the Australian system) is continuing to refine the strategic planning process it started before 2000.

Our New Zealand schools are required to participate in a stringent government quality-assurance program that also includes strategic planning. The government Education Review Office conducts rigorous audits in all our schools and publishes their reports on national Websites and in local newspapers. Throughout the SPD, we are starting to add principal and teacher evaluations to the quality-assurance process.

### Higher Education

Student enrollment continues to grow in the SPD's four tertiary institutions. Avondale College broke the "1,000 barrier" for the first time in 2005. Its new off-campus Master's program has flourished, with 129 scholars enrolled this year. Meanwhile, the college continues to pursue the lengthy and rigorous process of gaining university status.

While embarking on an ambitious building program, Pacific Adventist University (PAU) has also enrolled a record number of students (almost 500). In addition to its new church, it is currently adding new dormitories and a health-science education facility, with an administration block to follow.

Since 2000, the SPD tertiary institutions have found many ways to collaborate and consolidate. First, our Sops Hospital School of Nursing moved onto the PAU campus. Then, following its successful primary teacher-education affiliation with PAU, Fulton College has begun to offer part of a PAU theology degree program. In addition, Sonoma Adventist College in New Guinea has just formally signed a Memorandum of Understanding with PAU, meaning that PAU will validate its academic programs.

### Conclusion

In the past five years, demands on the wider church and financial stresses in our tertiary institutions and schools



Students from Ironback Christian School in Australia explore nature.



A drama presentation by Australian secondary students.



Samoan primary students learn practical skills.



Students from the Southland Adventist Christian School in New Zealand.





Avondale, Australia, secondary school band.



Catering class at Avondale Secondary School.



Students participate in a daily work program at Fulton College in Fiji.



Avondale secondary students on a campout.



Students relax in front of the Avondale College chapel.



Students at South Auckland Adventist Primary School in New Zealand.

have created competition for diminishing resources. However, we have seen good growth in the tertiary sector and the mushrooming of some larger schools. Our professional development program is progressing well, and we continue to develop our strategic planning and distinctive Adventist ethos and curricula. It is our goal in the coming quinquennium to continue to apply and live our vision, and to show our clients

the wonderful things that Adventist education can do. ✍



**Barry Hill** is Director of Education for the South Pacific Division in Warrongga, New South Wales, Australia.