

# The Challenging World of a Board Chair

BY TOM MOSTERT

**F**or nearly 30 years, I chaired K-16 educational boards. For the 21 years before I recently retired, I chaired two university boards and served on two others. Each institution is unique, as are their boards. Here are my thoughts on what we should expect from board chairs in this challenging time for Adventist education:

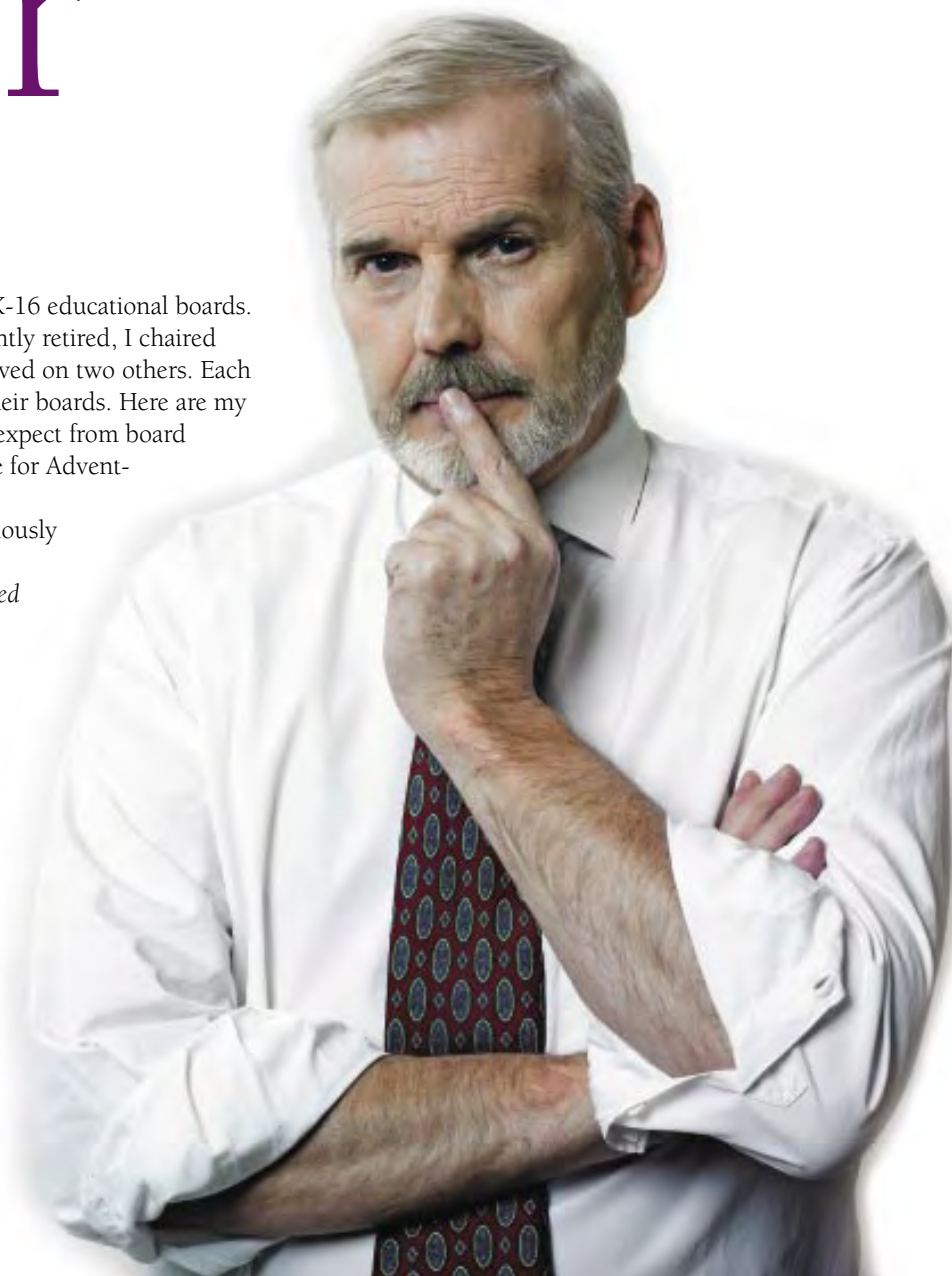
A board chair must continuously interact with five diverse groups:

- *The constituents, who have distinct and varied ideas about the way the institution should be run and how it should relate to a multitude of issues.* If not satisfied, they withdraw their financial support or vote you out of office at the next constituency meeting.

- *Parents and students, who have their own agenda.* If it is not met, they vote with their feet. Since enrollment is everything, this group has tremendous clout in the direction schools take.

- *Faculty who are paid to think, explore, challenge, and debate.* If they are restless or upset, nothing on campus will go well. Yet every day on campus, someone is going to say or do something with the potential to create controversy.

- *School administration, led by the president, who are constantly under even more pressure than the chair.* They must decide what needs attention now or can wait until later; what can be decided internally,



and what needs board approval.

• In addition to listening to and interacting with the four groups listed above, *the governing board is charged with the responsibility of decision making.* Leading out in that process is the chair, who may or may not have experience in this unique role. (It is unfortunate that there is not more training available in this area.) Since all these publics have varying ideas, forcefully held, the chair will constantly receive conflicting advice, demands, and complaints.

Here are my seven suggestions on how he or she can function most effectively:

**First, accept that it is impossible to please all the different groups, and expect to be criticized for whatever direction you lead or don't lead.** Try not to take it personally. But at the same time, counsel with these groups widely and often so you are not alone in your thinking or actions.

**Second, provide leadership in goal-setting for the institution, holding campus leaders responsible for performance and resolving problems.** Nothing is more frustrating than a chair so political that he won't take a stand or express an opinion.

All of your publics need to know where you stand and why. Without leaders at every level who are willing to stand up—and speak up—for what they believe, institutions drift. Consult often with the president/principal to be sure you agree on the direction the school should take.

**Third, make sure the board understands the issues so they can make intelligent decisions.**

At the same time, they need to avoid micro-management of the day-to-day affairs of the school and must not inject themselves into student, faculty, and administration relationships. It is up to the board, with leadership from the various constituencies, to set the overall direction, and then leave it to the administration, faculty, and staff to make it happen. This is especially difficult for lay members who run their own business or

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medical practice and are used to being in charge. It can also be difficult for church leaders who are used to the participative governance system of the church rather than the presidential system of educational institutions.

**Fourth, watch out for board members who want to dominate the discussion and set the school direction according to their own personal ideas.**

Many times, the wealthy members unconsciously feel they should have more than their one voice or vote. The chair must make sure all members are treated equally and fairly. It goes without saying

that he must also be careful not to dominate the discussion. I have found that humor can break up tense confrontations, especially when you remind the group that we all win some and lose some in the course of debates.

**Fifth, develop a cordial working relationship with the president or principal.** Don't micro-manage his or her responsibilities, but give do the president your cell phone number and invite contact at any time 24-7. Personally, I have always asked for and promised two things to maintain a good working relationship with the

president: First, we must always be honest with each other and never lie. We must maintain trust. Second, we must keep each other informed about of significant events and problems. No one likes surprises. It is much easier to be supportive if both know the facts before a major crisis breaks.

**Sixth, pray before and during every board meeting that God will give you personal peace and inner calm.**

Few things are worse than the chair losing composure during a board meeting. If things get too heated, take a break so people can move around and calm down.

**Seventh, and most important of all, have a clear**

*idea of what God wants for this institution.* After all, it is His. We operate it to accomplish His mission. Constantly bring the board back to the big issues, and make sure all decisions are in harmony with the principles of heaven. As a chair, spend quality time learning and expanding your understanding of mission. It is amazing how often this key point gets lost in the midst of “urgent” matters being discussed.

**Here are some concepts I have found helpful to keep in mind when leading a board:**

- Because the institution is a church entity, the chair of the board of trustees needs to have a broad knowledge of church objectives, principles, and operating policies, and the ability to interpret them to the board. This is a complex responsibility because not every operating policy can be applied with precise uniformity to every type of activity.
- Educational institutions are an integral part of the conference or union, so they have a shared mission.
- To be an integral part of the church means the institution’s first priority is to provide Adventist education to Seventh-day Adventist youth. For a university, that means the top priority is not research or being known as a “premier university,” although we need to be the very best we can be. The university does not revolve around the collective vision and desires of the faculty, administration, or board, but around the mission of the church. Its primary purpose is to educate Adventist youth in an atmosphere that both nurtures and develops faith.
- History has shown that schools established to nurture youth in a spiritual atmosphere while they gain an education have usually come under increasing pressure to diminish this emphasis, focusing instead on learning and research. For this reason, most of these schools have changed their focus and become more interested in academics than in spiritual life. It

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will take constant dialogue and energy to maintain our Adventist purpose. There are those on nearly every campus who do not support this focus. They are constantly seeking ways to remove the restraints imposed by a pervasively religious worldview and church involvement.

• When Adventist higher education first began, Ellen White reminded its founders of the need for it to be different: “To give

students merely knowledge of books is not the purpose of the institution. Such an education can be obtained at any college in the land” (*Christian Education*, p. 36).

• The board of trustees is not elected to serve only the faculty and administration. They are to manage all the temporal activities, business, and affairs of the university in accordance with the principles of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

• One important way we ensure the campus does not stray from its purpose is to employ faculty who share the Adventist worldview. While it may be necessary to temporarily employ some who have not embraced our worldview but are sympathetic to it, they should be replaced as soon as possible by Seventh-day Adventist faculty.

The Seventh-day Adventist Christian worldview, while respecting the views of other religious bodies, is totally unique. It involves an understanding of Revelation 14 and 18 that ends up calling other Christians out of their churches. You simply can’t subscribe to another worldview and effectively communicate the Adventist message and culture to students. Preferential hiring is not discriminatory, so long as non-Adventist faculty members and applicants are aware of the limitations. It is absolutely necessary to have fellow believers in charge of maintaining our Adventist identity and thinking. That is why this should be a non-negotiable matter for the board and the constituency.

In my opinion, being a good board chair means knowing what is happening in the various publics that interact with the institution, and clearly understanding the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its institutions. If the board chair keeps those areas always in mind and seeks divine guidance, God will surely bless his efforts. ✍



Tom Mostert (right), the author of this article, addresses the La Sierra University (LSU) trustees at his final meeting as board chair in November 2007. Seated next to him is LSU President Randal Wisbey.



At the time this article was written, **Thomas Mostert** had been President of the Pacific Union Conference in Westlake Village, California, for 21 years.

During that time, he was the board chair for La Sierra University (Riverside, California) and Pacific Union College (Angwin, California). Elder Mostert has also served as a pastor, conference ministerial director, and president of three North American Division conferences. He recently retired and lives in Gresham, Oregon.