



# Building A Working Relationship

## Between Institutional Boards and Accrediting and Chartering Authorities

**T**he Seventh-day Adventist Church's education system has grown and developed over the past 140 years. Initially, it started as a small system with just a few institutions that focused mainly on preparing workers for the denomination. At that time, accreditation did not exist and thus was not an issue. As the church has grown and spread in the succeeding years, so has the demand for Adventist education by the church's membership; consequently, many more institutions have been established. For example, the number of Adventist higher educational institutions increased from two in 1880<sup>1</sup> to 115 in 2017<sup>2</sup>; similar growth has occurred at K-12 levels.

Since the main source of institutional income has always been tuition, the need for optimum enrollment steadily increased until it was no longer expected that all graduates

from these institutions would find employment or pursue advanced studies in the church or its educational institutions. After all, while church institutions are established firstly to prepare workers for the church, they are also expected to provide educational opportunities to church members' children who wish to study in a Christian environment, and to prepare them to be professionals and church members even if they do not become church employees.

Additionally, many of the people enrolling in Adventist higher education institutions are adults, some of whom are not Adventists, but have a desire to study within an institution grounded in a Christian worldview. According to Ellen White in the books *Patriarchs and Prophets* and *Beginning of the End*, among the objectives for establishing the schools of the prophets, after which model Adventist schools are patterned, the following stand out prominently:

- To serve as barriers against wide-

spread corruption in society;

- To provide for students' mental and spiritual welfare; and
- To promote the prosperity of society by furnishing it with men and women qualified to act in the fear of God as leaders and counselors.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, Adventist schools have always attracted students who, either because of their parents' desires or their own, wish to explore what it means to be distinctively Christian and to study in such an atmosphere. It would, therefore, be impractical to assume that all these would be employed by the church. Many would seek to work in other sectors and, through their influence, become a source of inspiration to society. In order to obtain employment in the public sector, these students, as well as many of those employed by Adventist institutions, needed qualifications earned at a recognized institution.

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This then led to the need for Adventist educational institutions to seek accreditation from government and regional accrediting agencies, a decision that was first made after thoughtful debate, careful consideration, seeking of spiritual guidance, and prayer. Governing boards of Seventh-day Adventist institutions operate under the authority of their constituencies as well as in consonance with the regulations of their chartering authorities.<sup>4</sup>

Operating in such a dual system raises important questions, such as: To what should governing boards pay attention? How should governing boards handle their relationship with chartering authorities and accreditation agencies? Which ideals do these bodies value most? To what degree should conditions for operations established by chartering authorities and accrediting agencies be accepted? Which conditions should be negotiable, and which ones not? Is there a tipping point at which an institution's governing board decides to forfeit accreditation by government agencies and secular accrediting agencies? What external influences can hamper the board's work?

For many schools, operating in a dual system resembles the Bible's advice about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, rather than attempting to serve two masters. Being able to detect these challenges and relate them to the institutional mission and the Adventist philosophy of education makes relationships to chartering bodies and accrediting agencies much easier, even if some challenges remain unresolved.

Government chartering agencies and accrediting organizations differ somewhat in the manner in which they function, but all have some (though varied) authority regarding the provision of education and the manner in which educational institutions are governed within a given country, state, or region over which they have jurisdiction. Since, in most countries, it is expected that institu-

tions have governing boards, some of these organizations also have documents, articles, statements, guidelines, or provisions relating to governance, which include both expectations and functions. Some go as far as to stipulate the membership of boards or to suggest which organizations/institutions should be represented on governing boards.

With the authority delegated to them by their respective governments, chartering agencies can authorize the opening of institutions—and by the same authority, they can also “close” institutions. They stipulate conditions under which institutions may be opened and operated, and violations that may lead to various consequences—which may include demands that colleges cease operation, suspension or withdrawal of their license to operate certain programs or offer certain degrees, and withdrawal of authorization for government-guaranteed student loans. Such actions would result in graduates receiving unrecognized qualifications or students having insufficient funds to afford to enroll in the institutions. Because of this authority, institutions find themselves bound to follow the commands given by their chartering authorities—and sometimes, are tempted to compromise their fundamental creeds.

In some countries, where the conditions are very stringent and acquiescing to them would lead to serious compromise, or where the implementation of the conditions would make it difficult to adhere to the school's fundamental creed, governing boards and constituencies choose to defer or avoid seeking such authorization and either function clandestinely as seminaries or in “affiliation” with one or more other, often foreign, institutions. This action may be taken for the whole institution or, in rare cases, for certain programs that the chartering authority is unlikely to recognize.

When such institutions are owned and operated by an organized religious body, they generally use and highly esteem their denominationally based accreditation despite such organizations' rather “limited legitimacy.” One such agency is the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities—commonly referred to as the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA).<sup>5</sup> Denominational accreditation, though helpful (especially when combined with national accreditation), may provide only limited benefits. This means that qualifications—certificates, diplomas, and degrees acquired by students after a course of study in such an institution—may not be recognized within the countries where they operate or by public education systems. Additionally, graduates may not qualify for entry into professions in other countries. The qualifications are, however, generally recognized within the religious body's educational system.

Also, in some cases where the government provides tuition grants or scholarships, the students in these institutions are not eligible for these monies. Other associated challenges include students facing hardships in accessing scholastic materials, which may be subsidized by the respective governments; college/university administration experiencing difficulty securing work permits for expatriate employees; employees encountering taxation issues, etc. Yet, despite these challenges, organizations—including government organizations seeking academic excellence and integrity in performance—have employed graduates from such institutions/programs, even ones lacking accreditation recognition because of the quality of their values-laden education.

### Relating to Chartering Authorities and Accrediting Organizations

This article will discuss four essential principles to keep in mind when building relationships and relating to

chartering authorities and accrediting organizations. It must be acknowledged that there are varying situations in different countries and that no single solution will address all situations. However, the list below will suggest useful guidelines that administrators and board members can use when faced with difficult situations.

### **1. Commit and Adhere to a Clear Mission and Philosophy.**

Institutional boards must pay attention to how well they embrace and adhere to the school's mission and philosophy. The mission and philosophy of Adventist education should be the foremost guiding principle when addressing issues related to governance—as it should be for everything else (see George Knight's work on this topic, along with Rasi et al.'s statement on Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy<sup>6</sup>). In general, while some systems may operate without overt reference to a specific worldview and philosophy, all systems are based on a worldview that guides the kind of decisions made and the ensuing actions. Governing boards of Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions should ensure they base their decisions on the mission and philosophy of Adventist education.

Provisionally, with only a few exceptions, most chartering authorities and accrediting organizations do respect those who state their philosophies and abide by them. They consider it as commitment to a cause that should be honored as long as that cause does not interfere with the rights of others.

Some government chartering authorities have granted authorization to church institutions hoping they will provide a balance or an alternative to public education, in which they recognize some flaws, shortfalls, or inadequacies. Such governments would probably be disappointed if church institutions ended

up compromising their principles—the basis for which they were granted legal authorization. Our schools must avoid the path taken by a number of great educational institutions that began with Christian philosophies but gradually lost their connection to their founding organizations and abandoned the tenets they originally espoused. Abandoning institutional mission and philosophy can lead to dire results such as losing direction in a very complex maze of ideas and losing constituency support.

### **2. Handle Board Membership Selection and Orientation With Care.**

School chartering authorities, which normally represent the political interests of the government, have a mandate to ensure that there is adequate representation in terms of gender, regional balance, different sectors of society, employees, etc. They also have to ensure that the schools they charter are accountable to the government and the general public; and especially if there are government grants involved, ascertaining that these monies are not used for political or sectarian leverage to advance personal or sectarian agendas (see Box 1 for Web links to a few of such agencies' statements).

While some chartering authorities and accrediting organizations may seek to prescribe who should be on the board or which categories of society ought to be represented, the nomination or election of members to serve on a school board should always be handled with much care. In some countries where the church has a large membership, there may be a large group of professionals with different backgrounds from whom suitable members of governing boards could be selected. These individuals may include Seventh-day Adventists who work in the public sector but understand and appreciate the worldview and philosophy of denominational education. Additionally, there are professional members of the church who may be acceptable as

representatives for the suggested categories. Some chartering authorities and most accrediting organizations will trust the church to select suitable members of the board without demanding to oversee the process. Such actions need to be carefully executed so that this trust is not compromised. There are, however, a few situations where this is not the case. Consequently, a careful discussion with the chartering authority may be necessary and, if extreme disagreement occurs, deferral of seeking authorization may end up being a preferred option.

In all situations, and particularly in cases where people who are not well acquainted with the Adventist education system become members of the board, adequate orientation and board education is an imperative. This will ensure that new board members become acquainted with the mission, philosophy, and functioning of the institution, all of which drive other decisions and processes.

Team-building training should also form an essential part of such orientations to enhance mutual understanding among the members of the board. Simple things such as processes (how things are done) and even jargon (e.g., terminology used within the Adventist Church) may imply different things to the different groups and could be a source of misunderstanding. It is common to use what one is used to as the standard; however, it is important to remember that the way things are done could be based on a certain philosophy or just a preferred practice. With clear communication, misunderstandings can be avoided.

### **3. Cultivate Mutual Understanding and Act With Integrity.**

In order to make the best choices in any given circumstance, school boards should seek to acquire a comprehensive and compassionate understanding of the different worldviews

## Box 1. Examples of Country Guidelines.

### **KENYA: Universities Standards and Guidelines (2014), 4: Governance and Management INST/STD/03**

<http://www.cue.or.ke/index.php/provision-of-security-services/category/16-standards-and-guidelines?download=101:universities-standards-and-guidelines-2014>

### **AUSTRALIA – Seminar on Governing bodies of higher education institutions: Roles and responsibilities University Governance by Colin Walters to OECD.**

<http://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/37378292.pdf>

### **NIGERIA – Requirements for the Establishment of a Private University, Security Screening of Proprietors and Board of Trustees (Step 11)**

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/310365-nigerian-government-presents-licences-to-four-new-private-universities.html>

and philosophies they are likely to encounter in the public sector. All decisions and systems are based on a worldview. Thus, an understanding of the different worldviews of other institutions from which members may be drawn, as well as those of chartering authorities and accrediting agencies, will be very beneficial when reviewing the chartering agency documents that spell out the conditions for operating a private church institution. Such knowledge can help board members understand why various institutions operate the way they do and how to relate to them appropriately.

This is particularly true when there might be a need to negotiate. Negotiation should be done from a firm understanding of the school's mission and philosophy and with a high level of integrity and accountability. Easy compromise and lack of accountability may lead to the chartering authorities taking advantage of the institution administrators' compromise and lack of accountability and may make the situation more difficult when the board is faced with crucial and important decisions.

Acquiring a keen and thorough understanding can also be helpful in ascertaining the intent of the documents that the state requires for approval of school programs. Negotiating with understanding helps the institution present another perspective that could be considered as a credible alternative, even though it comes from what the chartering agency may be tempted to dismiss as a "little denominational institution."

It is also important to understand that most governments do give licenses to educational institutions or have established a system to do so because they want to protect and disseminate a certain philosophy. These philosophies may not agree or align completely with the one advocated by the church institution but may still share many things in common with it. An example of this is Paul at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:23, 34, NIV), where he referred to what was common to "break the ice," and this resulted in greater success for the gospel. Negotiations should be done from an attitude of thoughtful understanding rather than one of superiority or paranoia.

## **4. Recognize and Take Into Account Political Influences.**

Institutional school boards often face significant difficulties because of political challenges, which may seriously hamper their work. Political pressures, both external and internal, are considered the most difficult ones to handle. Oftentimes political allegiances lead people (administrators, boards, constituencies, governments, etc.) to act in ways that may be considered irrational and that contravene their own convictions, beliefs, or worldviews.

It is also important to remember that political climates change. A Pharaoh who never knew Joseph (Exodus 1:8; Acts 7:18) can easily obtain power in a particular country and create a difficult situation. Taking advantage of political allegiances should therefore be handled from an ethical point of view that can withstand all circumstances, regardless of the new leader. Such interactions should be rooted in the school's mission and philosophy. Exploitation of political leverage for any reason can lead to results that may be very difficult to handle, as well as the possibility of being misunderstood by subsequent leadership and politicians.

God's people are advised to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16, NIV).<sup>7</sup> Politics are a reality that boards cannot avoid. Finding balance in these situations will result in genuine advancement for the institution and could even reduce the number of government and accrediting agency restrictions. For example, a school may decide to relinquish the chartering agencies' authorization even though it comes with the promise of much-needed grants or financial support if such authorization will result in compromising the institution's fundamental creed. Concern may be expressed that this will have a deleterious effect on the institution's ability to thrive and the church's work to progress in that nation. The Bible says that He who started a good work

will see it to its eventual successful completion (Philippians 1:6). This does not, however, imply sitting idle and not doing anything. On the contrary! Paul also described life as a race that requires effort (Hebrews 12:1). Therefore, our school boards will need to carefully inform themselves about the situation and employ creativity to seek all possible recognitions that will benefit the school's students and alumni, while remaining faithful to institutional mission and philosophy.

### Concluding Thoughts

Governing boards must pay careful attention to their institution's guiding mission and philosophy. Chartering authorities and accrediting organizations are often willing to negotiate with institutions that consistently adhere to a clear mission and vision and stand firmly on their philosophy. Although there are often both internal and external political pressures that can make governing difficult, diligent boards will often be able to discover methods and opportunities to negotiate an acceptable solution. Detecting and resolving such challenges is possible when boards and school administrators work together and understand the essentials of working with chartering agencies and accrediting organizations.

Board members must also take time to understand their colleagues—their backgrounds, responsibilities, and environment, and to build team spirit and genuine and ethical camaraderie. Ultimately, boards must develop strong negotiating skills based on the purpose and mission of their institution, and use a Christian ethical stance when engaging with these agencies and organizations. A healthy prayer life, team spirit, and ongoing orientation and training are essential and integral to successful relationships with chartering agencies and accrediting organizations, and a vital part of effective board functioning. ✍

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Homer R. Salsbury, "A Steady Growth," *Christian Education* 3:1 (September/October 1911): 14.
2. General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, *2017 Annual Statistical Report*: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2017.pdf>, 9.
3. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1890), 431; \_\_\_\_\_, *Beginning of the End* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2007), 300.
4. In this article, *constituencies* refers to the church organizations that own and/or operate the institution or which the institution primarily serves. "Chartering authority" is a term used to refer to government agencies that authorize, license, accredit, register, or charter tertiary educational institutions; e.g., agencies that give them legal status in the countries where they operate. These agencies go by different names in different places, for example: Higher Education Commission (Pakistan), National Council for Higher Education (Uganda), University Grants Commission (India), Council for Higher Education (Israel), Commission of

University Education (Kenya), and the National Accreditation Boards (Malaysia).

In the United States, there is the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in Washington, D.C., comprised of higher education institutions as well as mainly regional, but also private, faith-based accrediting agencies. Regional agencies include: Middle States Commission of Higher Education, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and the WASC Senior College and University Commission. The council serves as an advocate for self-regulation of academic quality. Although it does not give legitimacy to institutions and is not a government agency, accreditation by regional accrediting agencies is a major factor in determining Federal government student financial support in U.S. territories, often given to students studying in institutions accredited by accrediting agencies which are themselves recognized by the council.

5. The Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (AAA): <https://adventistaccreditingassociation.org/>.

6. For more on the philosophy of Adventist education, see George R. Knight, *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2016) or the special continuing-education issue on the same topic published by *The Journal of Adventist Education* 73:1 (October/December 2010): <https://education.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/JAE-Philosophy-of-Adventist-Education-JAE-33-English.pdf>; Humberto Rasi, et al., "A Statement of Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy" (April 2001): [https://education.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/A\\_Statement\\_of\\_Seventh-day\\_Adventist\\_Educational\\_Philosophy\\_2001.pdf](https://education.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/A_Statement_of_Seventh-day_Adventist_Educational_Philosophy_2001.pdf).

7. Matthew 10:16, *New International Version* (NIV). *Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.