

## **The Church School: When Churches and Schools Collaborate in Mission**

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This article presents a vision for the resurrection of Adventist education by proposing to do things differently. The sad reality is that 247 schools in 14 years or 170 in seven years of our NAD Adventist schools have closed. When I heard this alarming statistic, I asked myself if we in the Seminary can contribute to reversing this trend. Forgive my simplification of a complex problem, but sometimes an overgeneralization can help us to identify issues and help to progress and grow. So where do the problems lie? They are present on several levels:

1. Many of our pastors did not have an opportunity to go through the excellent Adventist system of education. They converted later or even if they grew up in an Adventist family their parents for some reason decided not to send them to our schools, so they do not have an Adventist educational experience. This fact may contribute to their feeling or even conviction that Adventists schools are not so crucial for educating our children and youth.
2. Effectiveness of pastors is usually evaluated by the number of baptisms, financial growth (like tithing), and preaching, but not so much by their involvement in the school, the success of the church school, being present and advising, encouraging, playing with children and young adults, teaching Bible classes, leading worship, etc.
3. Conventional thinking is that the Adventist school operates under the supervision of the local church (and rightly so), therefore the church decides what will happen in that

school. When people speak about the relationship between the school and the church, the center of such symbiosis is the church. However, the church is open only for several hours during the week, but the school operates almost all the time. Also secular people are biased against the church, but not so much toward an educational institution.

4. In addition, it could be that a pastor and the church board (and many members) may perceive the school as a financial burden (a school will be never a factory for producing money), a time consuming enterprise, and the business of others, namely of the school principal and his/her team of teachers and staff. They may think that the school board is a subsidiary to the church board.
  
5. Most importantly I realized, to my amazement, that there is no class taught in the Seminary for pastors regarding the importance of Adventist education and how to practically collaborate between the church and the school. So we are part of the problem.

We need to break through these stereotypes. Fresh thinking and a new practice model is needed which can bring tremendous results. We all agree that the school, church, and home need to closely collaborate in order for the system to work. Without this close connectedness and the sense of togetherness, nothing will change, grow, and advance. The Valuegenesis research regarding Adventist education shows that having quality homes, churches, and schools increases the possibility of children and young adults of both growing in faith and being committed to the Seventh-day Adventist message, lifestyle, mission, and church. The longer one is involved in Adventist education, the more loyal and mature one's faith generally becomes.

The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University wants to be a center of such an innovative approach to education. It is our desire to lead in the best educational practices for ministers. This proposal has a potential to revive Adventist education as well as renew a close and fruitful cooperation between the school, the home, and the church, because it will enable young men and women to grow up with a deep appreciation of Adventist identity and lifestyle. They will learn to know and enjoy what it is to be Adventist. It will help stem the tide of the tragic loss of youth from the church, in excess of 60%; it will facilitate the development of a new era of young Adventist leadership within the church as a result of a school and church partnership, and schools will become powerful magnets to draw unchurched families to God *through the Adventist school into the church.*

This new initiative of cooperation between church, schools, and pastors is built on the following items:

1. In the Seminary we are creating a course for all MDiv students (pastors) in which the beauty and importance of the Adventist philosophy of education will be taught. In close collaboration with the North America Division Education department, we desire to develop a meaningful, interactive, and relevant course to equip our pastors with the best skills for creating this new approach to our educational system.
2. We would like to change the pattern of thinking about the educational system. Instead of having the church be the center of action, we think that pastors should make the school the location where different activities take place for reaching the local community. It should be an evangelistic center functioning as a community magnet. Since the school is

open with multiple interactions taking place during the majority of a year's days, it will thus result in promoting Adventist education both within the church and the community at large.

3. The community is open toward Adventist schools, because they provide a safe and healthy environment and excellent, high quality education. It means that the community is usually without biases and prejudices toward our schools, and we need to take advantage of it.
  
4. So the school should be the center of community life and strongly supported by the local church as people have no biases or prejudices when they interact with a school. The school should be an open community, very friendly, and inviting. It then becomes a center for community life through the children and their parents. Consequently, the school should be a center for evangelism (understood in a broader way than only having evangelistic preaching campaigns). For me, all various activities and everything done in such a center is evangelism. Besides being an educational center for children and/or young adults, schools can have evening classes and variety of different activities for the community. It can be a place where people with different interests can meet and interact, learn, and have social activities. They can be a location where sporting events are organized, language classes are offered, an immigrant center is established, feeding programs for the poor and elderly are developed, health programs are held, cooking classes offered, etc. Our schools can be a powerful evangelistic center for building bridges in the community between different religious groups. Within these educational centers a variety of clubs, such as traveling or reading clubs, welfare outreach, lifelong

learning programs, agricultural programs, Bible study centers, anti-stress and anti-addiction centers could be offered and maybe even a bakery and/or cafeteria for the community could be built. We need to be creative in offering relevant programs to build strong community ties. For everyone but especially for young people, friendship is evangelism. Our schools should be safe places for fellowship, friendship, and emotional healing.

5. Such a living and learning community then needs a worship center, creating an increasingly deep need for the church. Such an active community will be a worshipping community. Membership in the church will grow naturally as people will be integrated into the school's activities, and they will be attracted by the balanced Adventist lifestyle which will lead them to be attracted to the beauty of the Adventist message and the living God. The Bible will be studied with enthusiasm and joy.
6. A community of love attracts and transforms people. The early church lived, worked, served, and worshipped together, this is why God added many to their community of faith (see Acts 2:42-47).
7. Close collaboration between the pastor and the principal is needed, and we would like to teach them how to develop healthy and meaningful relations. The school should be a church during the week.

This Seminary class will be very practical. The Department of Discipleship and Religious Education will lead in this important endeavor. Pastors should become the *influencers* within the church to grasp this new concept and gradually implemented these ideas in life. So we plan to give our student-pastors field practicums. Under the leadership of their professor, they will visit for several days successful schools, small and bigger, in order to learn from observation what is actually working in the field. They will be taught how to maintain and grow current schools and how to create new ones so education can be resurrected again and flourish in many parts of our NAD territory. Our God is an awesome God, and He wants to care for children and young adults, because He loves them. To do so, He needs dedicated, cheerful, and contagious people to build this wide community of faith, love, and hope.

In this new course we also want to teach how to integrate into the church life graduates of different Adventist and state colleges and universities. The transition between university and church is where we usually keep or lose our young people.

In the Seminary, we want to promote the foundational principles of Christian and particularly the Adventist philosophy of education. As we know, these basic principles are perfectly outlined in the book *Education* by Ellen G. White. She expressed a famous dictum, “education is redemption,” and we need to again put it into practice: “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, ‘other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’ 1 Corinthians 3:11” (Ellen G. White, *Education*, 30). She aptly explains: “To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life. Love, the basis of creation

and of redemption, is the basis of true education” (Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15–16). She admonishes that we ourselves learn the science of the cross and teach it to our young people: “The revelation of God's love to man centers in the cross. Its full significance tongue cannot utter; pen cannot portray; the mind of man cannot comprehend. . . . Christ crucified for our sins, Christ risen from the dead, Christ ascended on high, is the science of salvation that we are to learn and to teach” (Ellen G. White, *God's Amazing Grace*, 178). “Let the youth make the word of God the food of mind and soul. Let the cross of Christ be made the science of all education, the center of all teaching and all study” (Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 360).

Please pray for the teacher of this new class, because that person will have a noble task to connect the Seminary more closely to the NAD Adventist educational system and churches. This professor will be responsible for a variety of field trips which should teach pastors how to be relevant and give them practical lessons on this approach where religious education closely involves collaboration among the school, church, and home. This professor will teach seminarians and youth leaders to be disciplers rather than only pastors or teachers, and will teach pastors how to cooperate with educators in maintaining schools and creating new ones that become vibrant centers of congregational life and mission. Established churches would become affiliates of these schools and new church plants could be established on the campuses of these schools. Teachers will help pastors to realize that equipping young people and giving them responsibilities is a powerful way to ensure their involvement and commitment in local churches.

The transitioning to this model will result, I strongly believe, in strengthening the pastor's own Adventist identity and lifestyle, discovering how to make our message even more relevant, deepening close collaboration between the church, schools, and parents, and fostering a rich daily walk with God which will become an influential magnet to draw secular families and

immigrants, and the larger community to God. The *school* in close connection with the *church* will become an important part of *community* life. In this way, community is built together around children and families and grows to reach and fulfill the different needs of people who live in their vicinity in order to become their real neighbors. True Christianity is to love God above all from all our heart, mind, emotions and will, and our neighbors as we love ourselves, or better as Jesus loves us (Luke 10:17; John 13:34–35).