

Adventist Education in the 21st Century: Eight Significant Trends

BY HUMBERTO M. RASI

The pioneers who officially launched Adventist education in 1872 would be truly amazed if they could see the international reach of that initiative some 138 years later.¹ From a one-room school that met above the living quarters of the teacher, Goodloe Harper Bell, in Battle Creek, Michigan, that tentative project has truly become a global enterprise.²

If our forerunners were alive today, they could take a whirlwind tour of an Adventist floating school with 26 indigenous students on Lake Titicaca in Peru, then travel to the largest Adventist higher secondary school in Maningar East, India, with 8,550 students, and later visit the four Adventist universities with more than 5,000 students in Brazil, Jamaica, Korea, and Nigeria. What amazing things God has wrought!

An Expanding Focus

What was originally conceived of as a sheltered setting to teach the basics to children of Adventist families in Battle Creek soon became the first training center for future Adventist ministers. As time went on, other college programs were added to prepare teachers, health-care specialists, managers, and missionaries for the Adventist Church in North America and to become trailblazers abroad.

As the educational network expanded rapidly during subsequent decades, it became clear that denominational schools at mission outposts were an effective method of attracting students of other faiths to Adventist beliefs. More adjustments followed. By the second half of the 20th century, our colleges were providing professional education to a growing number of Adventists who did not plan to work

for the church, but intended to find employment in various organizations or establish their own businesses. A decade into the 21st century, students pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees in the 110 Adventist colleges, seminaries, and universities envision careers in a broad variety of professional settings.

A Visionary Voice

From the very beginning, the leading voice in providing the conceptual foundation and projecting the vision of Adventist education was a woman who did not have extensive formal schooling but who was well read—Ellen Harmon White. In her 30-page essay “Proper Education” (1872-1873)—later expanded in her books *Education* (1903) and *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (1913)—she outlined a visionary yet practical philosophy and mission for Adventist education that continues to guide and challenge our teachers and leaders. The distinctive features of her vision include an education that:

- Affirms God as the Creator and the ultimate source of all truth, goodness, and beauty;
- Is Bible-based, Christ-centered, and projected toward an eternal life with God;
- Seeks harmonious development of the whole person—heart, mind, body, and relationships;
- Nurtures the formation of a character based on core Christian values;
- Provides balance among solid scholarship, creative thinking, and practical skills;
- Promotes loving service to fellow human beings as life’s highest calling; and
- Encourages students to commit their lives to Christ and join the Adventist Church.

Positive Trends

By God’s providence, Adventists now operate the *broadest* (in global scope), most *unified* (with a supervisory structure ranging from the local field to the world headquarters), and *coordinated* (by interconnected governance boards) *church-related educational system in the world*.³

Four positive trends in Adventist education deserve mention:

- **Steady growth.** Today, on a regular class day, 1.67 million children and young adults study with 7,800 teachers, in 84,000 Adventist schools, colleges, and universities, in 145 countries of the world. See Charts 1 and 2.
- **Increased recognition** by government authorities and families from other faiths of the value of the education provided by Adventists. More than half of the students en-

rolled come from non-Adventist homes. In addition, by national decrees or charter documents, national governments continue to grant authorization to open new Adventist universities—from Argentina to Zimbabwe. The latest was authorized by the government of Paraguay in late 2009. Many students graduating from our professional programs—in business, education, and nursing—are eagerly sought by employers for their moral values and superior skills.

- **Spiritual formation and service.** Many Adventist secondary and tertiary institutions have been strengthening their religion courses and implementing a spiritual master plan to coordinate all curricular and co-curricular activities in order to better convey biblical beliefs and values to the students.⁴ In addition, a large number of colleges and universities have incorporated a service component in their programs, thus engaging students in improving the living conditions of human beings in their own countries and abroad.

- **Mission.** Adventist educational institutions continue to provide gospel entry into large regions of the world where public evangelism is restricted or forbidden. Key denominational workers—pastors, teachers, health-care personnel, managers—as well as professionals who serve as lay leaders in their congregations receive their formation in Adventist educational centers. Many church administrators rely on the specialists teaching in Adventist universities to conduct surveys, draft public statements, and develop strategic plans. More benefits would accrue to the church at large if this cooperative partnership were expanded.

Challenges Then and Now

The first steps in the journey of Adventist education were uncertain. Limited human resources, perennial financial difficulties, and disagreements regarding the purpose, scope, and methods of the educational enterprise caused frustration and delays. Only during the first two decades of the 20th century, when Frederick Griggs became the leading voice in Adventist education, were clearer focus, broader consensus, and stronger organizational structure finally achieved. Yet many challenges remain. Let’s review the major ones.

- **Declining students-to-members ratios.** As the Adventist message has spread and the church membership has expanded—especially in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America—a growing gap has appeared between the number of Adventist members and students enrolled in Adventist schools. In some areas of the world, there is stagnation or retrenchment as Adventist el-

Chart 1. Seventh-day Adventist Education			
World Statistics December 31, 2009			
	Schools	Teachers	Students
Elementary	5,899	43,491	1,085,177
Secondary	1,748	30,287	457,934
Training Schools	47	612	8,076
Colleges & Universities	110	10,607	122,641
Totals	7,804	84,997	1,673,828

ementary and secondary schools are closed for lack of support. Statistics indicate that while in 1960 there were 23 students attending an Adventist educational institution per 100 church members, by the year 2000, the ratio had dropped to 9 students per 100 church members. This proportion remained stable through the end of 2008. (See Chart 3.) However, fewer than half of these students now come from Adventist homes.⁵ (See Chart 4.) This growing imbalance should deeply concern all of us—church leaders, ministers, parents, and members—because it means that fewer Adventist students receive their education and moral formation in Adventist classrooms.

- **Preserving Adventist identity and mission.** The increasing reputation of our education programs in many countries has reached a point in which more non-Adventist students than Adventists are now enrolled in our schools, at all levels. (See Chart 4.) While we rejoice in this trend, we need to critically evaluate whether we are diluting our identity and evangelistic mission in order to accommodate the large influx of students of other faiths. We also need to find out why many church members are not enrolling their children and youth in our schools. Statistics reveal a steady decline in the percentage of Adventist students at all levels of education. In addition, the proportion of teachers of other faiths also continues to increase. (See Chart 5.) To what extent are such teachers able to convey core Adventist beliefs to our students? Administrators must also ask whether we are starting schools and launching new degree programs before we have the required personnel.

- **Attracting and upgrading educators and leaders.** The growing complexity of leading and managing the church's schools, academies, and universities requires skilled people committed to the Adventist educational mission. There is an urgent need for qualified Adventist teachers who love students and are passionate about their eternal salvation. Are we carefully selecting and initiating them, as well as providing them with adequate salaries? Teachers who are already in our system need to receive quality in-service training to stay up-to-date in their disciplines and in their spiritual mission. Well-planned teacher conventions, seminars on the integration of faith and learning, and substantial workshops will help. Educators who show Christian leadership abilities must be identified early by their principals, superintendents, and boards, and given opportunities and financial support so that they can obtain professional upgrading and be ready to assume administrative positions when vacancies occur.

In addition, all boards governing our educational centers should consist of members who value Adventist education, understand its mission and challenges, are knowledgeable regarding academic matters, financial issues, and future planning, and will offer the wise guidance and sustained support our schools need. Board members should receive training and in-service to equip them for their responsibilities.

- **Providing access to Adventist schools.** An education that is both thoroughly Christian and academically supe-

rior is not inexpensive. Our schools, academies, and universities must offer such quality while responding to rising national standards, increasing government requirements, high parent and student expectations, and restricted church appropriations. At the same time, many Adventist families of limited resources struggle to pay their children's tuition, cover teachers' salaries, or contribute the funds required to

Chart 2. Seventh-day Adventist Schools

Growth in Student Enrollment Worldwide

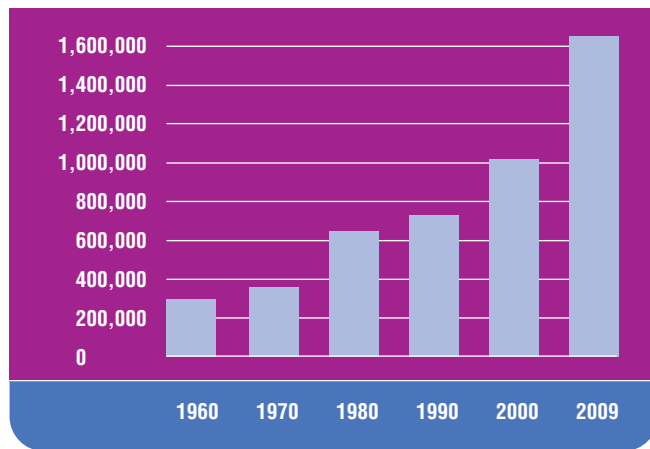
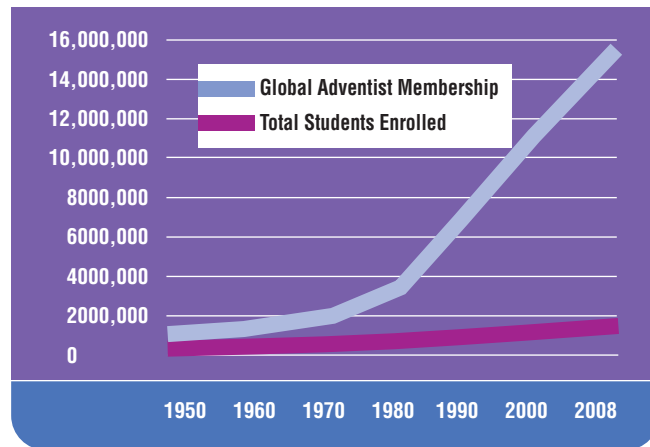


Chart 3. Seventh-day Adventist Schools

Declining Students-to-Members Ratios



upgrade, build, or expand our school buildings. Will Adventist parents recognize that the eternal salvation of their sons and daughters is at stake and make the required sacrifices to enroll them in an Adventist school? Will church leaders provide adequate budget support for the education of our own children and youth? Will all church members regularly contribute the money needed so that all Adventist children and youth can receive the long-term benefits of studying in an Adventist school or academy?

Conclusion

It is well known that most facets of contemporary culture are hostile to Christian beliefs and values. Some Adventist homes are unable to provide the balanced formation that our children and youth need. Thus Adventist schools, academies, and universities offer students a unique opportunity to develop their God-given talents and pre-

pare for a useful life while being nurtured by Adventist teachers and mentors, and set their ultimate goal an eternal life on the Earth Made New.

is that he or she will be academically successful, will form a Christian home, and will support Adventist mission.⁶ One thing is clear: Without our educational institutions and their dedicated teachers, this world would not see a dynamic, unified, and mission-oriented Seventh-day Adventist Church moving forward to prepare people for God's kingdom. ✍

Chart 4. Percentage of Adventist Enrollment

at All Levels, 2000-2008

	2000	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Primary	46%	43%	43%	40%	40%	44%
Secondary	43%	43%	38%	37%	34%	36%
Worker Training	80%	52%	51%	48%	47%	49%
Tertiary	75%	66%	62%	60%	57%	60%

Chart 5. Percentage of Adventist Teachers

at All Levels, 2000-2008

	2000	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Primary	81.5	80.8	78.6	66.5	68.8	77.1
Secondary	79.4	74.7	75.7	72.9	72.1	71.3
Worker Training	85.2	76.7	72.6	77.6	77.0	75.6
Tertiary	82.0	78.9	75.6	73.3	77.6	75.8
Total	82.0	78.5	75.6	69.6	71.0	74.8

In spite of their challenges, our educational institutions continue to provide the best context for the formation of a Christ-like character, preparation for advanced degrees, and achieving their professional goals. Several studies have demonstrated that the longer a young person attends an Adventist school, academy or university, the more likely it



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The first school with an Adventist teacher and Adventist students was organized by five families in Buck's Bridge, New York, in 1853. The first teacher was Martha Byington, the daughter of John Byington, who would eventually serve as the first president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (1863-1865). This experiment in Adventist education lasted only three years.

2. Floyd Greenleaf expertly describes this global expansion and its accompanying struggles in his comprehensive book *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2005). An updated edition of this book is now available in Spanish: *Historia de la educación adventista: Una visión global* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Adventus/Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2010).

3. The Roman Catholic Church has many more students enrolled in their educational institutions. However, Catholic schools are either operated by their individual dioceses or by separate religious orders, without a worldwide coordinating or supervisory organizational structure.

4. See "A Guidebook for Creating and Implementing a Spiritual Master Plan on Seventh-day Adventist Campuses of Higher Education," in Humberto M. Rasi, compiler, *Christ in the Classroom* (Silver Spring, Maryland: General Conference Education Department, 1999), vol. 23, pp. 363-394.

5. The author thanks Dr. Lisa Beardsley for making available this and the following chart to accompany this article.

6. See, for example, Warren Earl Minder, "A Study of the Relationship Between Church-Sponsored K-12 Education and Church Membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Ed.D. dissertation, Western Michigan University, 1985; Kenneth James Epperson, "The Relationship of Seventh-day Adventist School Attendance to Seventh-day Adventist Church Membership in the Southern Union Conference," Ed.D. dissertation, Loma Linda University, 1990; Robert W. Rice, "A Survey of the Relationship Between Attending Seventh-day Adventist Academies 9-12 and Subsequent Commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver, 1990; Roger L. Dudley, "Christian Education and Youth Retention in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Findings from a 10-Year Longitudinal Study," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 62:3 (February/March 2000); and Elissa E. Kido, Jerome D. Thayer, and Robert J. Cruise, "Assessing Adventist Academics: A Mid-Point Update on Cognitive Genesis," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 71:2 (December 2008/January 2009), pp. 3-9.