

# ***PROJECT AFFIRMATION***

## ***Building Consensus, Planning for Success***

By Charles T. Smith

**W**hat is Project Affirmation? How did it begin? What are its goals? What is its status today? What groups and activities does it involve? What recommendations will it make?

### ***How Project Affirmation Began***

In recent years growing numbers of Adventist educators, administrators, and lay people have become increasingly concerned that interest in and involvement with the church and its school system were waning. Several groups essential to the success of Adventist education seemed increasingly antagonistic to one another and unable to support or

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revitalize Adventist education in North America.

Teachers, pastors, school administrators, parents, students, school boards, conference leaders, and coordinating boards seemed to be pulling in different directions. Appar-

ently overwhelmed by the complexity of the task at hand, many of these people had little sense of forward motion. Their relationships often deteriorated into bickering and scapegoating. Oftentimes they seemed to be straining at the gnats of administrative detail rather than building a sense of community and consensus based on:

- a clear sense of mission;
- shared visions of the future;
- specific goals, or
- strategies to move them from where they were to where they wanted to be—plans that would guarantee accountability and

responsibility as they worked to achieve a shared vision of the future.

As we laid the groundwork for Project Affirmation, Gordon Madgwick, executive secretary, North American Division Board of Higher Education; Fred Stephan, then NAD director of education, K-12; and I addressed some daunting challenges.

1. How could we get people to listen to one another?
2. How could we overcome the estrangement among groups vital to the future success of Adventist education?
3. What was the best way to build consensus about future directions for Adventist education?
4. How could we revitalize the founders' visions of what Adventist education should be?

#### ***What Church Members Want For Adventist Education***

We began the search for renewal with the Seltzer Daley study. This broad market research study revealed church members' general perceptions of Adventist education. We set out to determine whether consensus *could* be built. Were Adventists insufficiently interested in education or so divided as to make consensus and improvement impossible?

We found consensus on several key issues:

#### **Adventist education is**

- central to the mission of the church and the salvation of its children,

- the key to the future survival of the church, and
- *the means for developing lay and clerical leadership of the church.*

#### **Adventists want**

- excellent education for their children,
- biblical values to permeate their schools,
- excellence in spiritual and academic pursuits,
- educators who care about their children,
- better information about the educational programs and processes relating to Adventist schools, and
- a sound financial base for Adventist education so all students who wish to participate will be able to do so.

In January 1988 the Joint Boards of Education, K-12 and Higher Education, met in Loma Linda, California, to review the results of the

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Seltzer Daley Study. In a vision-to-action planning session they conceived and launched Project Affirmation. What have been the results?

#### ***What is Project Affirmation?***

Project Affirmation is a three-year program to translate church members' visions into educational change—to give Adventists a reason to stay committed to Seventh-day Adventist education. In order to overcome the problems facing Adventist education today, we have set in motion a process of planned change in the schools and colleges. This process will continue into the 21st century.

We have established four task forces: Values, Faith, and Commitment; Academic Quality and Valued Educators; Marketing; and Alternative Financial Strategies. These groups are conducting research, making recommendations, and developing resources to improve Adventist education. Their joint research project, *Valuegenesis*, is the most important study of youth ever carried out by any church body in North America.

*Valuegenesis* was designed to determine what factors in Adventist homes, schools, and churches nurture the values and faith we cherish for our youth. The study also evaluates the quality of Adventist education from the perspective of pastors, teachers, parents, students, and school administrators. Findings from the *Valuegenesis* study will be released during 1990 and 1991.

Merton Strommen and Shelby Andress, our consultants from

Search Institute of Minneapolis, and I have trained more than 90 Project Affirmation facilitators to conduct vision-to-action planning sessions across the North American Division. Designed for local schools or conference-wide groups, these sessions help church members define the future they desire for their schools, build on strengths, and plan for constructive change.

Sessions allow grass-roots involvement in shaping the future, developing specific plans for strengthening local schools and for following through with action to implement desired change.

#### **What Is Being Accomplished?**

We believe that Project Affirmation is helping the North American church achieve four major goals:

- A deeper understanding of constituent concerns at the local school, church, and conference levels,
- New resources for meeting the needs of teachers and schools,
- A tremendous data bank from which to develop materials to help educators, parents, and pastors nurture the development of our young people's values, faith, and commitment to Christ and the church, and,
- Most important, a process of planned change—an ongoing effort at all levels to keep Adventist schools and colleges moving toward excellence.

The vision-to-action planning process provides a workshop experience for groups who want to clarify the mission of their school. It helps them define a shared vision of their future

and take action to make that vision a reality. More than 200 of these sessions have already been held. Another 200 to 300 are planned for 1990. Groups begin by assessing the current situation and defining what pleases and troubles them about their school(s). After visualizing the future they desire for their schools, they put their conclusions into writing. They then set about establishing well-defined plans for making their goals a reality.

Additional facilitator training sessions in 1990 and 1991 will develop a network of planned change consultants to assist with education and other church ministries. Focus will be placed on using *Valuegenesis* information and *Risk and Promise* imperatives for improving schools, academies, and colleges. To show how widespread is the impact of action planning sessions, here is a brief description of the kinds of people involved in these sessions: pastors, academy principals, conference administrators, superintendents of education and other conference departmental staff, and laypersons are meeting in a number of locations in Alaska, Montana, Washington, Maryland, Virginia, Mississippi, the Dakotas, and Texas.<sup>1</sup>

What sort of field response has been generated by these vision-to-action planning sessions? As one layman in Anchorage, Alaska, put it: "They're actually listening. Conference officials were here, and they were interested in what we had to say."

Oakwood College visioning session participants praised the cooperation and openness of participants: "It's

exciting to see a growing concern and awareness that we need to change and that we can change." "It's wonderful knowing that there were others who shared my concerns." "Most of us feel the same way, but won't speak up except in a meeting such as this."

Benjamin Reeves, president of Oakwood College, says his administrators are using Project Affirmation-trained facilitator Claude Thomas to help communicate with its constituencies and to advise its strategic planning process. He reports that the morale of faculty and staff is at an all-time high as they see their ideas helping to shape the future direction of the college.

Paul Kilgore, education director for the Atlantic Union, tells about a visioning session in a small church in Buffalo, New York. With only two students enrolled, the church school has been fighting for its life. At an education day the conference education superintendent, Jean Prest, held a two-hour visioning session. The church decided to schedule another and to do more planning. Members' attitudes are positive. "I praise the Lord for Project Affirmation," says Kilgore.

#### **What Is Risk and Promise: Imperatives for Adventist Education?**

Designed as a master plan report, *Risk and Promise: Imperatives* is the report of Project Affirmation's Coordinating Council and four Task Forces (values, quality, marketing, and finance). It is the product of two years of research projects, philosophical papers, and the development of practical resources. The report will undergo its final revision June 17 to 19, 1990. Between March and June of this year, preliminary drafts of the report were previewed with union and local conference lay and clerical leadership. Compiled from input gained through vision-to-action planning sessions, task force research, and reviews of all Ellen White's counsels on education, *Risk and Promise* reflects the risks facing Adventist education in North America: declining enrollments, increasing costs, competition from non-Adventist schools, and an apparent erosion of moral values and faith commitment in students, parents, and society.

Still, we see a very high level of commitment and quality in many of our schools. Community resource teams are forming to support Adventist schools and other events promise even better things for the future. The report offers suggestions

for converting the risk into promise. That's why it's called Imperatives.

The how-to recommendations appear in the *Risk and Promise: Implementation Series*. This series of publications gives specific practical suggestions for schools and colleges. For instance, a seminar has been presented in five union conferences to introduce one of our *Implementation Series* productions, *A Marketing Guide for Elementary and Secondary Schools*. Focusing on the educational needs and desires of parents, students, and school communities, the *Guide* helps school marketing teams translate Adventist community needs into increased enrollments.

### Applying Marketing Strategies

Jim Epperson, director of education in the Southern Union, reports that pastors who attended the seminar were absolutely on fire. They said, "Not only is this good for educators, this is good for me." As a result, they are using marketing strategies in their churches. They hope to change thinking processes.

Epperson notes that even some pessimistic principals came out of the seminar feeling enthusiastic. They have initiated their own marketing programs with materials provided in the seminar.

Bob Caskey, Forest Lake Academy principal, says his marketing team felt that the seminar was absolutely the best meeting they had ever attended from an Adventist-operated organization.

In the Columbia Union, Director of Education Dick Osborn says, "The seminar is probably the most enthusiastic meeting that we've ever had at the union office. Our principals said, however, 'It's not complete unless all the teachers are involved in the marketing process.' So we've scheduled a morning and afternoon at the Columbia Union Teachers' Convention for a marketing session for all of our teachers."

Clarence Dunbebin, associate superintendent of education for the Potomac Conference, has started a marketing newsletter for his conference schools. The newsletter keeps the marketing concepts before the eyes of all members of the school marketing teams.<sup>2</sup>

Carole Breckenridge, director of marketing for the Adult Evening Program at Columbia Union College says, "I had just taken a new position and was grasping as a teacher who had really not been in marketing. The seminar was a wonderful introduction and immersion in marketing in general with the specifics of how to

do it in schools.... The material I took home in my binder I keep as kind of a Bible on my desk.... Everyone that I've talked with since... went home just bursting over with ideas for the small two-teacher schools. Congratulations."

Don Keele, director of education for the North Pacific Union, says things are already happening in his area. "The very next week after our marketing seminar at another education council attendees from one of our conferences got together to plan and share some marketing strategies." What pleased him most was the excitement of the lay people, who offered thought provoking questions and insights.

One school board chairman said, "This is the first thing we've had to help run the schools. I've even used some of it in my business."

An Adventist layperson in Oregon who is helping her child's school with marketing says, "I worked in marketing communication for several years and my company paid big bucks sending me out of state to advertising and marketing seminars. I found this to be the best I've attended. It was wonderfully practical and the manual will make it *much* simpler to implement just about everything."

### Video for Multigrade Teachers

Another Implementation Series product, *The Small School Digest*, has a three-video, guided self-study seminar for teachers in one-, two-, and three-room schools. Produced by the North Pacific Union Department of Education, this seminar enhances teachers' administrative, curriculum, and classroom management skills. Another how-to aid, *Values Videos*, promotes discussion on values conflicts facing youth today, the most important values to teach Adventist youth, and how best to communicate these values. Other spiritually oriented resources will include *Hot Topics* (life-style discussions between youth and adults), *Youth Ministry* (how and why), and *Perspectives on Values*.

A young teacher in California tells about her participation in a manuscript preview conference for the *Perspectives on Values* book. "This has been a life-changing conference for me. I was struggling myself with some of the issues in our church and couldn't figure out how to talk to my students about them. Now I can sort out the difference between values and standards and help my students do the same. Now I can communicate deeply with a commitment to young people and help them clarify spiritual issues in their own lives."

Future financial resources will

include guides for developing volunteer/parent involvement programs, development/fund-raising programs for elementary and secondary schools, as well as "How to Understand School Financial Reports" (questions school board members should be asking and getting answered), and "How to Use Financial Ratios in Managing Secondary Schools."

Gil Plubell, North American Division director of education, indicates that the "Building a Volunteer Program" publication includes how to use volunteers in school programs, how to involve parents as volunteers, and how to use intergenerational volunteers. The latter segment includes a training course to certify retirees as school volunteers. Reports indicate that at La Sierra Elementary/Academy, where one of the pilot studies was conducted, more than 200 parents came to the organizing meeting to volunteer to help.

### Conclusion

The genius of the Adventist system of education rests on three very important characteristics. First, its foundation on divinely revealed principles to restore in human beings the image of their Creator. Second, its basis of local administration, involvement, and accessibility. And third, its vital integration in the life of the church. It is the church's best means of enculturating and developing in its youth and future leadership commitment to Christ and the church and a special life-style of love and service. This life of service to God and humanity begins now and continues for eternity.

Project Affirmation takes advantage of these characteristics. If, through Project Affirmation vision-to-action planning sessions, implementation guides, or the *Risk and Promise* report on imperatives for changes in Adventist education, each church member will become involved in education ministry in North America, we can ensure a bright future for our young people and for the church both now and throughout eternity. □

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Contact your union or conference director of education to obtain names of persons who are qualified to help your school or church.

<sup>2</sup> The newsletter is available to any school that wishes to be put on the mailing list. Those interested should contact Dr. Clarence Dunbebin, Associate Superintendent of Education, Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, P.O. Box 1208 Staunton, VA 24401.