
The Resurrection of Mount Vernon Academy

by Monte Sahlin

In the spring of 1986 the Ohio Conference constituency delegates seriously considered closing Mount Vernon Academy. Today, however, it is thriving, according to one lay leader “with more visible support than I’ve ever seen it have.”

From 1980 to 1985 the 100-year-old boarding school had an enrollment decline of 61 percent, while secondary enrollment throughout the Columbia Union declined 25 percent. During that period Mount Vernon Academy’s yearly operating loss (before conference subsidies) averaged \$428,000, more than twice the \$160,000 to \$190,000 average yearly operating loss of other boarding academies of similar size in the union.

During 1981-1985, the Ohio Conference put nearly \$2 million in operating subsidies into the academy, as well as taking over the mortgage on a major piece of property built for an academy industry that went under. Lay persons on the conference committee became increasingly concerned about the depletion of conference reserves, and at a March 1985 constituency session the delegates commissioned a second “blue-ribbon” panel (an earlier group had reported in 1983) to look into the situation.

The Taskforce on Secondary Education, chaired by Timothy McDonald, education director of the Columbia Union Conference, included business people and education professionals

employed outside the denomination, as well as pastors and denominational educators. Jan Kuzma, director of the Survey Research Service at Loma Linda University, consulted for the project. The taskforce spent a full year in careful fact-finding and analysis, and looked at eight alternatives for the future of secondary education in the Ohio Conference.

A demographic study indicated a shrinking pool of teenagers in Adventist homes—more than in previous years. But the taskforce found additional reasons for the declining enrollment including high tuition costs, a growing feeling among parents that sending teenagers away from home—even to an Adventist boarding academy—could be detrimental, and the disappointment of church members at a perceived lack of leadership, good management, and maintenance of high standards.

Although opinions among church members may not have been completely accurate, the failure of a number of attempts to start industries and the turnover in principals at the academy, as well as repeated budget overruns, low morale among the faculty, and the personal problems of one key staff member all contributed to a picture of an institution with little future. As discussion of the academy’s future spread in wider and wider circles, students wondered if they would be able to complete their secondary years at Mount Vernon.

When the taskforce circulated its 85-page report in the weeks ahead of the crucial March 16, 1986, constituency session, it made no recommendation to keep the school open. Instead, it

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listed what could be done once the school was shut down:

- developing dormitories at the conference's strong day academy near Dayton;
- upgrading five junior academies at major metropolitan areas around the state to full secondary schools;
- subsidizing attendance by Ohio boarding students at the academies in neighboring conferences;
- cosponsoring an institution with a neighboring conference;
- initiating a proposal with the Columbia Union to operate one boarding school for the entire region;
- moving MVA into a modern and smaller physical plant at another location in the state.

A cost/benefit analysis for each of these alternatives was included in the report, as well as opinion poll data on each one.

Since the vote to keep Mount Vernon open, natural gas was discovered under the campus. When a functioning well is completed it will be possible to meet the heating needs of the school and provide a tuition rebate to the students.

However, at its March 16 meeting the Ohio Conference constituency brushed the options aside, voted overwhelmingly to revitalize the school in its historic Mount Vernon location, and devised a plan calling for:

- a full-time recruiter for the school;
- spending \$25,000 a year on curriculum improvement;
- developing a \$1 million endowment for student aid;
- improving outreach and religious activities programs for students;
- renovating the physical plant;
- operating the school within a balanced budget;
- reopening school industries managed by a

board of lay persons who are successful business-people.

The approved plan also included what one delegate referred to privately as "a sleeping alligator"—a provision to go into effect if the plan is not implemented at any point in the future. Under this provision the conference president convenes a special meeting of the academy board, conference executive committee and board of education, together with 30 special delegates (10 selected by each of the three boards), to "decide on the continued operation" of the school.

Edward Motschiedler, the Ohio Conference president, had been in office only three months at the time of the constituency session. Yet as the former senior pastor of the Kettering Church, he was familiar with the issues. Calling his staff together the Monday after the vote, he asked them to clear their calendars for immediate attention to a plan of action.

Over the next few weeks Motschiedler met personally with interested church members in every section of the conference. A conference of Ohio pastors discussed in detail plans for Mount Vernon Academy. In his meetings around the conference Motschiedler continued to listen carefully, but also insisted on prompt implementation of the plans voted by the constituency.

A recruiter, hired within days of the vote, visited every pastoral district in the state by the June camp meeting. A \$30,000 matching grant from the Commonweal Foundation in Washington, D.C., got the fund raising started by the end of the summer, and Campbell and Company, a major national fund-raising firm, was hired to do a feasibility study and devise a strategic plan for the endowment.

When the 1986 school year started in August, enrollment had risen more than 50 percent to 154 students. The trend has continued with a projected enrollment of 168 for the 1987-1988 school year. By June 30, 1987, the alumni association had raised not only the \$30,000 to match the foundation grant, but another \$17,000 to match a challenge grant under a plan developed by Philanthropic Services at the General Conference. Since the vote to keep Mount Vernon open, natural gas was discovered under the campus. When a func-

tioning well is completed it will be possible to meet the heating needs of the school and provide a tuition rebate for students from Ohio Conference churches or alumni families.

The key to success has been the personal leadership and sacrifice of Charles Hanson, Ohio Conference superintendent of education and new academy principal. In the spring of 1985 when conditions at the school were at their lowest, the board fired the principal and asked Hanson to function in both jobs through the rest of the school year. By July it was clear that a replacement could not be hired while a study of possible closure was in progress, so Hanson was asked to continue in both jobs through the 1985-1986 school year and again in 1986-1987. He finally relinquished his responsibilities as education superintendent and is now the full-time academy principal.

The Ohio Conference recently hired Jeff Wilson from Faith For Today as a full-time development director with major responsibilities for the endowment fund. The Campbell and Company's feasibility study indicated the possibility of raising more than \$1 million in endowment funds if the purpose is broadened to include local church schools as well as secondary schools, and projects outside the field of education.

Conferences facing the possible closure of an academy might learn from this experience. First, a careful, unprejudiced look at the facts must be made. Enrollment projections and budgets must be studied as well as opinion polls of various seg-

ments of the constituency; demographic studies and academic measurements must be factored in to a careful comparison of the alternatives. Decisions made on the facts are better than those made on emotion.

Second, conflicting points of view must be heard. If elected conference leaders listen carefully they may gain the support of the constituency.

Third, like everything else in our world, education must be marketed or it will soon have no buyers. The enrollment at Mount Vernon during school years when there was a recruiting program stands in stark contrast to the years in which two or three of the faculty did a little recruiting during the summer.

Fourth, alumni and other lay leaders can be a powerful force for the survival of an institution if administrators bring them into planning sessions. The larger the network of "insiders," the greater the chance that sufficient fund-raising and recruiting will be accomplished.

Finally, a long-range effort at anticipating and planning for the needs of Christian education is essential in each local conference. The alternative may well be the loss of constituent support, both financial and attitudinal. Lay leaders and conference administrators must remain alert to shifting enrollment demographics, changing attitudes about day schools versus boarding schools, and increasingly sophisticated cost/benefit analysis by parents.