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# Discovering the Church's Vision of Education: Making the First Telephone Call

by Gordon Madgwick

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The educational system of the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America finds itself at an extremely critical point in its history. During just the five years from 1981-1986, Adventist colleges dropped in enrollment the equivalent of 2748 full-time students—about the same as closing three mid-sized Adventist colleges. Those same five years marked the period when enrollment in North American Adventist academies dropped almost 1000 students. Because fewer students will be graduating from academies, freshman classes in Adventist colleges are expected to shrink dramatically within one-and-a-half years.

The gravity of the condition facing our schools can be seen in the "Financial Summary of Educational Institutions, North American Division," for 1980-1986. During those six years, operating losses for colleges and universities increased from \$26.4 million to \$34.9 million (excluding church donations). Boarding-academy losses

rose from \$9.4 million to \$10.3 million. Day-academy losses escalated even more rapidly, from \$6.4 million to nearly \$8 million. Total losses, excluding donations, rose from \$42.2 million to more than \$53.4 million. (Figure 2, next page.)

The Seltzer Daley survey of Adventist members' attitudes towards their schools, which will be analyzed in detail later in this essay, reveals further disturbing news about the future of Adventist education in North America. A significant number of parents in the survey indicated that their offspring would not be attending an Adventist school or college in the current year, even when one is available. (Figure 1.)

need for an Adventist education, the lowest regard for Adventist schools, and the highest regard for public schools.

To survive, North American SDA schools will have to use every possible element of ingenuity, fiscal creativity, and strategic planning.

Of course, Adventist colleges are part of a larger scene. In 1983, George Keller, in his highly respected book, *Academic Strategy*, stated that experts were predicting that by 1995 as many as 30 percent of the colleges and universities in the United States might have vanished—either through merger or outright closure. America, he said, was facing a turning point in the history of

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**Fig. 1** Are You Planning to Send Your Children to SDA or Non-SDA Schools in the 1987-1988 School Year?

	% ADVENTIST	% NON-ADVENTIST
Grade school	67%	33%
Academy/high school	61%	39%
College/university	53%	47%

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Even more significantly for the future are the attitudes of those Adventists, who, within five years, will be deciding (or helping their children decide) whether they will attend Adventist schools: students who are now 19-25 years of age. Among all age groups they express the lowest level of belief in the

education. The "golden age" of higher education was clearly over.

That golden age had been a time of tremendous growth. According to federal statistics, the number of students more than tripled, from 2.5 million in 1955 to 8.8 million in 1974. During that time physical facilities for higher edu-

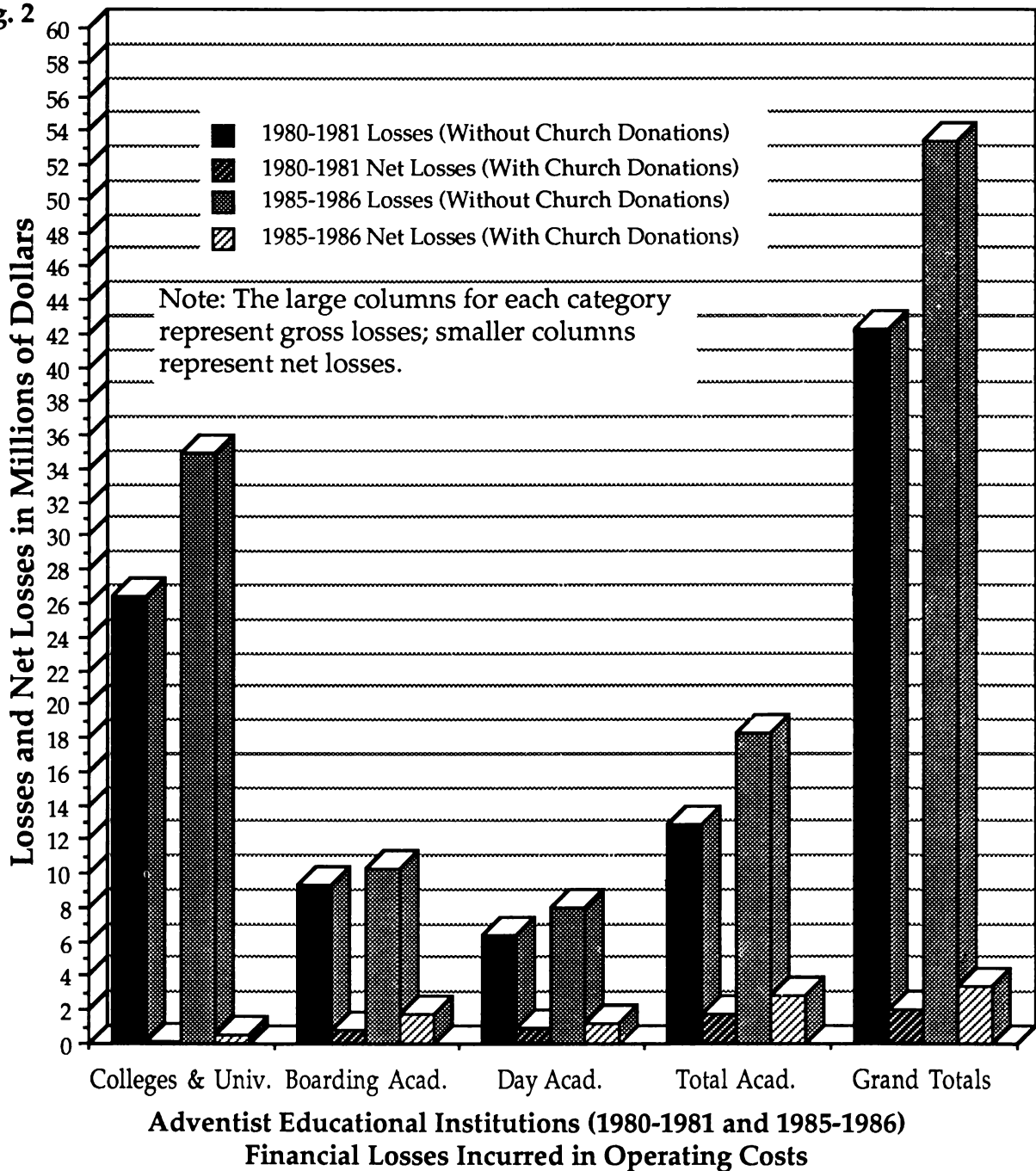
cation in the United States doubled. More college buildings were built in those 20 years than during the previous 200. During the golden age community colleges particularly expanded, their number doubling from about 400 to 973. Their enrollments exploded from 325,000 students to 3.4 million. In other words, 10 times as many students were studying in community colleges in 1974 as in 1955.

The North American Division, recognizing the urgent need to create a clear, bold vision for the future, convened a meeting of the K-12 Board and the Board of Higher Education (the Joint Boards of Education), on January 7, 1987, at Loma Linda University. The joint boards took action to insure the development of a joint master plan. That plan would delineate the innovations and actions necessary for the

Adventist system of academies and colleges to survive into the 21st century.

The boards voted to follow a three-step program that some other denominations have used to revitalize their church-related systems of education. First, strengthening ties with constituents by listening to their views and expectations. Second, clarifying the mission of the educational system and

Fig. 2



clearly articulating a vision of its future. Third, creating a master plan to fulfill the expectations expressed by the mission and vision of the future.

## Planning the First Telephone Call

The joint boards decided that the first step—listening to Adventist members—should begin with a telephone survey. It would obtain an up-to-date, objective map of the attitudes of North American members toward their educational system. The boards felt that whether or not the perception of members correspond to what actually takes place in the schools, the schools must respond to the perceptions. Clearly, the survey would be only a first telephone call, the initial part of a continuing, expanding program to invite constituencies to speak up about the direction they want their schools to go.

The choice to conduct the survey was the Seltzer Daley Companies. They had recently completed a church membership survey for the Adventist Health System/U.S. The companies had established a national reputation by conducting planning research and corporate strategy for such clients as AT&T, Bristol Meyers, General Foods, Gillette, Johnson & Johnson, the Mayo Clinic, and Sears Roebuck.

The four researchers who ran the survey for the North American Division complemented each other. Eliot Daley, a cofounder of the Seltzer Daley Companies and former president of the "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" organization, provided analysis skills and served as the main spokesman for the group. Mitchell Seltzer, a former corporate vice president for marketing and advertising for the Quaker Oats Company and currently vice chairman of the National Council for Children and Television, acted as internal critic within the group and its spokesperson. Jennifer Macleod, with a Ph.D. from Columbia University in social psychology, and formerly a research director

and chief psychologist with the Opinion Research Corporation in Princeton, directed the research design and analysis of the survey. Elayne Howard, with an M.B.A. from the Wharton School of Business, was managing director of the project.

The first task of the Seltzer Daley personnel was to review the relevant demographic statistics and economic trends in both Adventist and national publications. The writings of Ellen G. White were also studied in depth. The second task was to conduct in-depth interviews with key individuals representing a wide variety of informed views concerning Adventist education. Thirdly, focus groups were conducted with parents and students attending both Adventist and non-Adventist schools. Out of these focus groups a list of major issues was developed and extensively reviewed. Fourthly, a questionnaire of 162 questions was developed to investigate the major issues revealed in the exploratory research.

Most of the questions asked members to give their perception of the purpose and characteristics of Adventist education. In addition, the questionnaire, in order to obtain separate results for various subgroups, included numer-

ous background questions. Before implementation, the questionnaire was reviewed by members of the Joint Boards of Education and a special panel of educators with expertise in research and research design.

The questionnaire was carefully constructed to keep within a 45-minute limit. That is considered much too long for a general public telephone survey, but Seltzer Daley had found in its 1986 survey for the Adventist Health Systems that Adventists are extremely cooperative in surveys relating to their church. An incredible 96 percent of those contacted for this survey completed the entire 162 questions.

## Making the Calls

Telephone interviews were conducted with a total of 1419 members of the North American Division, a number comparable to election-year polls by Gallup and Harris surveying the entire country's preference for president of the United States. As in those opinion polls, respondents to this survey were scientifically selected.

The names and addresses of 1121

**Fig. 3** How Important Are SDA Schools to the Future of the Church?

	% Essential	% Very Important	% Fairly Important	% Not Important	% Undesirable	% Can't Answer
<b>GRADE SCHOOLS</b>						
Church members in general (1121)	46	42	9	2	1	1
Parents of students (381)	52	35	10	2	1	1
Students (183)	36	47	17	0	0	0
Educators (143)	70	25	4	1	0	0
Ministers (110)	80	18	0	2	0	0
<b>ACADEMIES</b>						
Church members in general (1121)	45	44	6	2	1	2
Parents of students (381)	54	32	8	4	2	*
Students (183)	34	45	16	2	2	0
Educators (143)	70	26	4	1	0	0
Ministers (110)	76	22	2	1	0	0
<b>COLLEGES/ UNIVERSITIES</b>						
Church members in general (1121)	39	44	14	2	*	2
Parents of students (381)	42	37	19	2	*	*
Students (183)	31	37	26	4	2	1
Educators (143)	56	31	12	1	0	0
Ministers (110)	68	26	6	1	0	0

\*Less than 1/2 of 1%

church members, aged 21 and upward, were drawn from the membership lists of each union conference in North America. Statistical weighting was used to ensure that the number of respondents in each union conference corresponded to the number of members in each union.

Within households with more than one adult member the adult with the most recent birthday was interviewed. This avoided bias due to some household members typically answering the telephone more often than others. Statistical weighting procedures also avoided bias resulting from the likelihood that members living alone would be interviewed more often than members living in households with several adults.

Employees appeared randomly in the general sample, or were selected from denominational lists, such as the *1987 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. These included 143 educators and 110 ministers.

The 183 students were those planning to attend a college or university (Adventist or non-Adventist), or who would be a senior at an academy or high school in the fall of 1987. Some students aged 21 and older were picked up in the general survey. Names and telephone numbers of other students were obtained from parents included in the general survey.

The survey provided separate re-

**Fig. 4** How Great Are the Improvements Needed in SDA Schools?

	% No major improvements needed	% Some major improvement needed	% Drastic change needed	% Closed/ Eliminated	% Don't know/ Can't answer
<b>1121 CHURCH MEMBERS</b>					
Grade schools	16	65	8	1	11
Day academies	17	51	8	*	23
Boarding academies	20	46	8	2	24
Colleges/universities	27	49	5	*	18

\*Less than 1/2 of 1%

sults for church members in general, educators, ministers, and students, as well as 56 subgroups based on various demographic and attitudinal patterns. Data from the survey generated 486 computer tables based on 70,000 individual statistics.

### Discovering a United Vision

Some denominational leaders anticipated that the Seltzer Daley survey would document a polarization within the North American Division about Adventist education. A number of church leaders expected the survey to show

large numbers of members echoing the sentiment found in the sort of letter published in 1987 in the *Pacific Union Recorder*: Adventist colleges have so strayed from their original purpose they might as well close down.

Many of us out here in the constituency of the church are puzzled at your puzzlement as to why enrollment has declined so sharply at our colleges for the last decade. We have been trying desperately to get through to you as our leaders with this message—It is not worth it to us to sacrifice and send our children to a Seventh-day Adventist college if the solid, historical doctrines, values and standards we believed when we attended college and still believe today are not upheld. It's as simple and as complex as that.

Furthermore, we are not fooled in the least by your insistence that all is well in these aforementioned areas, when plainly, it is not. Nor are we worried. God is in control. If it takes total financial collapse of our education system to show us that these institutions have already been lost to us—in that they bear little resemblance to the blueprint originally given to us—so be it, and praise God for His resourcefulness.

Actually, the survey demonstrated a remarkably unified vision of Adventist education, one that looks very different from that expressed by the correspon-

**Fig. 5** What Improvements Are the Most Important?

	<u>Grade Schools</u>	<u>Day Academies</u>	<u>Boarding Academies</u>	<u>Colleges/Universities</u>
% Giving responses relating to better academic quality (expand programs, improve teachers and quality of education)	43	31	24	31
% Giving responses relating to greater emphasis on spiritual and religious values (return to principles of faith, adhere to Adventist rules and standards)	16	22	17	24

**Fig. 6** How Important Are High-Quality Bible Classes and Spiritual-Growth Activities in SDA Schools?

1121 CHURCH MEMBERS	% Absolutely Essential	% Extremely Important	% Important	% Not Important	% Undesirable	% No answer/Don't Know
<b>High-Quality Bible Classes/Spiritual-Growth Activities</b>						
Grade schools	25	59	15	1	*	0
Academies	28	60	10	*	0	1
Colleges/universities	26	57	16	1	*	1
*Less than 1/2 of 1%						
<b>Basic SDA Religious Beliefs Upheld in Courses and Programs</b>						
Grade schools	22	55	19	3	*	1
Academies	28	52	18	1	*	•
Colleges/universities	25	51	20	2	*	1
*Less than 1/2 of 1%						
<b>SDA Atmosphere and Values Emphasized</b>						
Grade schools	19	56	22	1	1	1
Academies	26	53	19	1	*	1
Colleges/universities	22	54	20	3	*	2
*Less than 1/2 of 1%						

dent to the *Pacific Union Recorder* and other vocal critics of Adventist higher education.

One overwhelming sentiment is that Adventist schools are essential or very important to the future of the church (from 82 percent for colleges to 88 percent for grade schools).(Figure 3.)

The survey found further evidence that Adventists highly value their schools. At the grade school level, 80 percent of respondents rated their local Adventist school as excellent or good, while only 49 percent said the same for their local public school. At the high

school level the ratings for Adventist and non-Adventist schools were almost even: 76 percent and 74 percent respectively. At the collegiate level, there is a modest edge for Adventist over non-Adventist schools—87 percent to 76 percent. While Adventists value their schools and no almost no one stated that Adventist schools at any level should be closed or eliminated, many North American Adventists believe that improvements need to be made at all levels, with most choosing “some major improvements needed,” to describe their views. (Figure 4.)

*Academic Excellence, Religious Values — the Highest Priorities*

Perhaps the most surprising result of the survey was establishing that in their vision of education Adventist members place the highest priority on improving academic excellence. When those respondents who said improvements were needed, were then asked “What

**Fig. 7** How Important Is Providing Financial Aid so Any Adventist Family Can Send Their Children to SDA Schools?

1121 CHURCH MEMBERS	% Undesirable	% Not Important	% Important	% Extremely Important	% Close if Not Available	% No Answer/Don't Know
<b>Financial Aid Provided for Any Adventist Family</b>						
Grade school	1	3	22	52	20	2
Academy	1	2	23	56	17	2
College/university	1	4	25	51	16	3
<b>Ample Work Opportunities Available for Students</b>						
Academy	1	2	24	58	15	1
College/university	*	1	23	59	15	1
*Less than 1/2 of 1%						

major improvement do you have in mind?" they placed "better academic quality" above even "greater emphasis on spiritual and religious values" for every level of Adventist education, especially grade schools. (Figure 5, p. 58.)

These results correlate with other attitudes discovered by the survey. When it came to evaluating teachers, a

substantial majority of members said that they should be caring and committed, but even more said that it was "extremely important" or "absolutely essential" that the teacher have academic competence.

Certainly, in its unified central vision of Adventist education North American Adventists made it plain that

their other great value, in addition to academic excellence, was religion. In answering questions about spiritual-growth activities, teaching of religious beliefs, and emphasis on Adventist atmosphere and values, the majority stated that they regarded these aspects of education as "extremely important."

A significant minority, 19-29 per-

**Fig. 8 Who Should Be Responsible for Financial, Academic, Administrative, and Religious Matters in SDA Schools?**

1121 CHURCH MEMBERS	<u>Financial</u>	<u>Academic</u>	<u>Administrativ e</u>	<u>Religious</u>
<b>IN THE GRADE SCHOOLS (%)</b>				
School administrators	20	23	33	25
Teachers	8	28	20	34
Parents	34	22	21	24
Local school board	42	31	48	31
Local conference	37	37	37	30
Local union	4	11	8	7
North American Division Board of Education	9	21	12	10
Church members in general	35	9	12	17
All of the above	16	15	11	18
Other	5	4	4	9
Don't know or can't answer	1	3	3	2
<b>IN THE ACADEMIES (%)</b>				
School administrators	30	32	41	31
Teachers	8	26	16	28
Parents	26	19	17	21
Local school board	32	32	42	30
Local conference	48	40	48	37
Local union	14	12	11	10
North American Division Board of Education	14	22	10	12
Church members in general	17	7	9	11
All of the above	16	14	11	18
Other	3	3	3	7
Don't know or can't answer	3	3	3	2
<b>IN THE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (%)</b>				
College administrators	38	44	46	35
Teachers	8	25	16	24
Parents	15	10	9	11
Students	6	7	4	7
Board of the college	41	40	45	31
Union committee	33	28	31	26
North American Division Board of Education	27	32	25	23
Church members in general	12	6	7	10
All of the above	15	12	10	18
Other	6	7	7	9
Don't know or can't answer	5	3	5	3

**Fig. 9** How Important Is It for Students to Attend the Schools of Their Choice, Even If Their Parents Prefer a Different Choice?

COLLEGE	% Extremely Important	% Important	% Not Important	% Undesirable	% Can't Decide
Church members in general (1121)	29	49	16	1	6
Parents of college/university students (98)	20	55	18	2	6
Students under 25 years old (102)	61	36	3	0	0
Educators (143)	39	41	15	1	4
Ministers (110)	28	50	19	1	2
<b>HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL</b>					
Church members in general (1121)	16	47	20	7	10
Parents of academy/high school students (132)	16	49	22	9	4
Students under 25 years old (102)	38	40	20	1	1
Educators (143)	16	53	22	3	6
Ministers (110)	8	60	22	3	7

cent, may have felt so strongly about the “absolutely essential nature of some of these aspects” that they were ready, like the correspondent to the *Pacific Union Recorder*, for a school or college/university not meeting these standards for religion to be shut down. The minority chose “absolutely essential” to describe their attitude toward the centrality of religion, after having received instructions that such a designation would be appropriate if they felt that a school that did not meet such a requirement should be closed. (Figure 6, p. 59.)

Many anticipated that finances would emerge from the survey as a central concern of members. Although the emphases on academic excellence and spiritual growth proved to overshadow finances in the minds of North American Adventists, finances remain a matter of vital importance to planning for the educational future of the church. The survey revealed that a majority of members felt that it is extremely important for the church as a whole to provide sufficient financial aid so any Adventist child can attend an Adventist school right through their college and university years. (Figure 7, p. 59.)

Strengthening the credibility of this survey result is another piece of data. The Seltzer Daley team were astounded that 23 percent of the survey respondents said that they provide direct financial support for a student not a member of their family.

### *Democracy in Educational Planning Is an Imperative*

Faced with a future that is irrefutably precarious, how does Adventist education survive into the 21st century? How are necessary, sometimes dramatic, often painful changes to be made? The answer is the overall involvement of North American Adventist members in planning the revitalization of their educational system. The survey showed with clarity that most Adventists believe that decision-making about education should be shared among relevant groups. (Figure 8.)

One group particularly is perceived as deserving a voice in deciding the direction of Adventist education. The survey documented the extent to which North American Adventists are committed to students themselves having a strong say in which college—even which academy—they should attend. (Figure 9.)

Extending the franchise to students about the future of Adventist schools presents a distinct challenge. Students have a lower opinion than their elders of the academic quality of Adventist schools, have a higher opinion of public schools, and are less convinced of the

importance of Adventist education.

The Seltzer Daley analysis of their survey for the North American Division focused on democratization of decision-making: “The penalty for ignoring the fervent lay convictions would be severe.” They went on to say that,

A consensus cannot be composed, and change cannot be imposed, by fiat. A true consensus requires democracy. The leadership must reach down to the grass roots level, create a legitimate listening post, and incorporate it into the planning process. To do this requires deftness, ingenuity, and resources, as well as a planning effort that includes the entire Church.

One response to such blunt recommendations from highly respected consultants is to share the available facts with North American members through this essay, and others like it, in as many Adventist publications as possible. Only by widespread constituency involvement will answers be found for the renewal of Adventist education.

In addition, the Joint Boards of Education of the North American Division sponsored a planning conference, January 5-7, 1988, on the Loma Linda University campus. The conference involved 85 people representing a variety of groups and experience from across the North American Adventist church. The purpose of the conference was to set in motion a process. The

process would involve key Seventh-day Adventist constituencies in translating the shared vision of Adventist education the survey found among North American Adventists into a master plan for renewing North American Adventist education. The first telephone call has been made. Now North America is moving from the first step of listening to the views and expectations of members as a whole to involving members in the next steps necessary to create a master plan.

On the last afternoon of the conference, the Joint Boards voted to establish four major task forces and a council to coordinate their activities. Subsequently, the General Conference and North American Division Committees approved and implemented this action by providing the staff and resources necessary to carry out the work of the council.

The task forces will coordinate a broad scale involvement of Adventist constituencies in four distinct areas:

- Youth concerns, spiritual values
- Quality education, valued educators
- Marketing and advocacy
- Financial strategies, options

Now is the time for that overwhelming majority of Adventist members, so strongly committed to the importance of Adventist schools, to commit the time and effort to make certain that Adventist schools are known for being religiously distinctive, academically excellent, and financially affordable.