

Mission and Identity of Seventh-day Adventist Schools

BY HUDSON KIBUUKA

Every leader and worker in the Seventh-day Adventist Church's school system should be aware of and understand clearly the mission of the church, and keep it at the center of all their plans and activities. The mission is the driving force that gives any organization a reason to exist.¹ It should be accurately and concisely expressed through the institution's mission statement.

The mission statement is an important planning document.² It helps in building an institutional culture³ and defines the identity of the school, telling why it is different from other institutions.⁴ It ensures continuity of the institution's programs throughout changes and challenges. Ac-

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ording to Kohler,⁵ management without a mission is almost impossible. The mission of the school must be clearly defined and well understood by everyone connected with the institution⁶ in order for it to serve as a guide and inspiration in creating the desired school climate and culture.

However, as time passes, the mission of a church school may erode or be forgotten. As a result, the institution may lose its sense of direction and fail to address new roles and challenges, becoming indistinguishable from any other educational institution—a phenomenon that is commonly referred to as secularization. When this occurs, the church has to ask whether it can afford to merely duplicate what other schools offer, considering the high costs of operating such institutions.

The core mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church "is to proclaim to all the peoples the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Saviour and to unite with His Church, and nurturing them in preparation for His soon return," according to the General Conference Working Policy.⁷ In a similar vein, the original purpose for the church in operating

schools, outlined in the same policy, was "to actualize within the student all that he/she is intended to become—a child of God—and to prepare him/her for the joy of humane service in the world that now is, in anticipation of even wider fulfilment in the world that is

to come."⁸

Our schools were established to attract students who want to explore what it means to be distinctively Christian in the modern world. They were also intended to serve as barriers against wide-

spread corruption in society, to provide for students' mental and spiritual welfare, and to promote the prosperity of the society by furnishing men and women qualified to act in the fear of God as leaders and counsellors.⁹ This bold and distinctive mission and purpose for establishing and operating educational institutions are as valid today as in the 1800s, when our schools were established.

Key Factors That Shape a School's Mission and Identity

Without a succinct, well-defined mission, a church educational institution tends to lose its focus and drift toward secularism. Secularism generally refers to a belief system—political, social, or educational—that rejects religious faith and worship. This would seem to

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be antithetical to everything a Christian school stands for. However, secularism's take-over may be very subtle, a gradual slide into a nonbiblical worldview that mirrors the materialism and secularism of the society in which the school exists. Secularization usually takes place over a long period of time, and its progress may be difficult to detect.¹⁰ However, by the time it manifests itself openly, it has become deeply entrenched and almost irreversible without extremely bold and difficult steps. At this point, secularism has permeated the core of the institution—its employees—and has become firmly entrenched.

The initial challenges of secularism are often unspecific and somewhat vague.¹¹ They begin with frivolous questions and peripheral issues such as the name of an institution or the methods of

teaching certain doctrines.

However, over time, such questions can erode the mission and objectives of the school, making them so vague and unclear that they no longer reflect the rationale for establishing the school or the principles for which it should stand. Ironically, it is sometimes the secular society the institution has begun to mirror that raises questions about the school's mission and distinctiveness. We dare not wait for accreditation agencies and governmental bodies to demand that we have a clearly articulated vision and mission that permeates every aspect of our schools.

To avoid this, we must identify the causes and symptoms of secularism so we can maintain our schools' distinctive mission and objectives. Listed below are some key factors in maintaining the mission and identity of church educational institutions.

1. Teacher Recruitment

Teachers are the most important factor in fostering the mission of a school. They spend much time interacting with students, overtly as well as subtly communicating their perception of the mission of the school through their classroom teaching, assignments, co-curricular activities, interpersonal relationships, innuendo, and behavior. It is far easier and better to hire dedicated Christian teachers who are committed to the school's mission and goals than to try to "fix" ones already on staff who lack these attributes.

It is therefore imperative that, in recruiting and appointing teachers and staff members who interact regularly with students, extra care be taken to find people who support and uphold the mission of the institution. This is even more important than the candidate's professional background and degrees. The effects of teacher and staff interaction with students

continues long after the employee and students have left the school. Prospective teachers should be interviewed carefully by several individuals, using a pre-established set of questions that probe the candidate's level of spirituality and commitment to the church as well as his or her ability to interact positively with students and colleagues. The application form should request prospective employees to describe in writing their religious convictions and tell what contributions they can make to enhance the spiritual and academic goals of the institution.

Schools should also help current employees to further their understanding of the school's mission by involving them in seminars and discussion groups and encouraging them to participate in school activities.

2. The Board and Administration

The board plays a unique role through its responsibility for the long-term goals and plans of the school. This group must conceptualize the vision in a way that makes it real and then support its fulfillment by setting long- and short-term goals. In so doing, the board must remain focused on the mission and alert to any threats to its realization, such as a drift toward secularization. Otherwise, they may be caught unaware.

The school administration also plays a unique and important role in this task, since the school's day-to-day activities and the implementation of its long-term plans depend on their actions. The board and the administration should work harmoniously to implement and coordinate the institution's goals. Conflict between board and administration can foster secularization, since it can be exploited to advance divergent views. Those responsible for filling board positions should take special care to choose individuals who will support and further the mission of the school.

Board members should keep informed about institutional events and climate, while maintaining a reasonable distance. Their role is not to speak or act as individuals; their authority lies in their collective responsibility for the institution. Every school should produce and regularly update a handbook outlining trustees' roles and responsibilities, and give it to every board member. Retreats and training sessions for new members are also helpful.

3. Student Involvement

Peer influence can significantly exceed that of teachers, particularly in personal growth areas. The culture of the school revolves around, first and foremost, the contributions of the teachers, but also the impact of students on one another. A new student may be initiated into the school culture more effectively by fellow students than by school-sponsored events like an orientation week. It is, therefore, important for the school to involve the students in building the school culture through discussions, involvement in a variety of activities, and leadership responsibilities. Students need to know and constantly be reminded by precept, practice, and example of the institution's mission. Their contributions to building school spirit and culture should be more than mere rhetoric.

4. The Curriculum and Co-Curricular Activities

Even though most Adventist institutions operate within the general curriculum framework provided by state governments and accrediting agencies, their courses of study should approach learning in distinctively Christian ways. Integration of faith and learn-

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ing must permeate every discipline and class. Our schools' curricula should take a wholistic approach to education that incorporates the intellectual, emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual aspects of human development.

The same should be true of co-curricular activities. Both staff and students must pursue truth unabashedly because, as Jesus said, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32, NIV). Adventist education must set as its top priority to introduce students to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Its task is to prepare students to face the future, rather than just teaching the great truths of the past or the scientific discoveries of the present. This includes helping students to visualize what the world can be

like, through God's providence, and inspiring for them to commit themselves to making this a reality.

Integration of faith and learning can occur in every subject—from math to literature, from psychology to auto mechanics, from computer programming to physical education. However, many teachers, particularly those who have not been trained in Adventist schools, will need assistance in developing resources and methods for accomplishing this successfully. Boards and administrators must take very seriously their responsibility to provide opportunities for teachers to attend seminars, form discussion groups, attend classes taught by master teachers, engage in interdisciplinary dialogue, obtain helpful materials, and in other ways come to better understand and commit themselves to cultivating the creative and active integration of faith and learning.¹²

The school's top officer sets the tone in this area, so his or her commitment to integration of faith and learning and modeling of this concept through leadership and personal behavior are vital to

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developing a school mission and climate that are authentically Christian.

5. Stewardship of Institutional and Church Resources

God has made His followers stewards of all that He has given them, including the resources of our schools. Stewards are required to make proper use of and to be accountable for their resources, including personnel and financial ones. It is also important to remember that establishing our institutions required great sacrifices by their founders.

On the other hand, it is important to consider the cost before establishing new institutions. (See Luke 14:28-30.) It is futile and brings ridicule to God's church to establish institutions hurriedly and without proper planning. Such schools are likely to be of mediocre quality and will not bring glory to God.

Defining the mission of the institution and careful planning must precede ground-breaking and recruitment of teachers and students. This includes a realistic assessment of the short-term and long-term financial needs of the institution and ways to provide for them.¹³ According to Meyer,¹⁴ a church that wants to have strong institutions will need to find ways to ensure good stewardship in resource allocation in order to achieve the church's long-term goals. Furthermore, a well-run institution will be more likely to receive support from constituents and donors. This implies strategic planning—looking at the mission of the school and setting goals based on that mission.

6. Involving Institutional Personnel in the Church and Community Activities

Church educational institutions have a responsibility that extends beyond teaching. They need to look for opportunities to get involved in church and community activities. The school can serve as a "think tank" for the church and the community in helping them solve immediate and long-term problems.

On the other hand, as Ellen White¹⁵ suggests, the school needs to foster understanding of the appropriate roles and relationships between administrators, board members, teachers and staff members, students, parents, constituents, and church leaders. Unrealistic assumptions and expectations can make this interaction very difficult. Well-led educational institutions can play a vital role in help-

ing the church stay on the cutting edge in areas of mission in which both church and school can make significant contributions and in which both have long-term interests.¹⁶ This involvement can foster a sense of connectedness and ownership by the members of the community, challenging the perception that the institution is an "ivory tower" and out of touch with its community. Just as the teachers should look for opportunities to get involved with the church and the community, the church should actively seek to provide such opportunities for them to do so.

Conclusion

The mission and identity of an institution play a very important role in its success, as well as in building its culture. Institutional culture tells the stakeholders what the institution is about and enhances support for the institution. The mission statement keeps the institution focused and moving in the desired direction. It makes clear what the institution is about and defines its identity. Like the church itself, a Seventh-day Adventist institution should be identifiable by its mission, which is in turn translated into practice in a way that fits its culture and aligns with the church's mission. ☞

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