

Attention ! Choppers in the Compound: A Regional Solution to a National Problem

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In the 1950s, the U.S. sent troops to fight in Korea. There were no hospitals and no infrastructure in place to treat injured American soldiers, so the U.S. Army developed the M.A.S.H. unit (or Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) to temporarily treat soldiers near combat zones. These units had the flexibility to move to areas of need and to treat patients quickly without any paperwork for the injured soldiers to complete. There was no time to set up actual hospitals, only a quick and effective alternative. While Adventist education is not fighting a war, it is facing crippling problems and needs a similar solution. These problems prompt a closer look at the current system of Adventist education leadership, involving the administrators on the national, regional, and local levels.

The current system of Adventist education leadership may have sufficed in days when education was less complex and the size of the education system was far more manageable. Now, with 861 schools and nearly 77,000 students in the North American Division alone¹, it is time for a new system of leadership, which must be capable of diagnosing new problems, as well as developing and (most importantly) *implementing* solutions within the system so that it may keep up with the changes in current Adventist education. This leadership must enact a quick and flexible solution, like a M.A.S.H. unit, to immediately solve problems. Eventually, though, there must also be a fundamental reorganization of the system of leadership, just as Korea had to redevelop its infrastructure after the war.

In the T.V. sitcom M*A*S*H², named for the surgical unit, every time a helicopter filled with wounded soldiers in need of treatment entered the unit, a loudspeaker announcement would snap the surgical staff into action. “Attention! Choppers in the compound!” The staff would immediately rush to save soldier’s lives.

1 Journal of Adventist Education. *Adventist Education World Statistics*. (Silver Spring, MD, 2009)

2 M*A*S*H. Multiple episodes. Broadcast from September 17, 1972 to February 28, 1983. Developed by Larry Gelbart. Produced in association with 20th Century Fox Television.

The choppers have landed in the Adventist compound, filled with problems. Leadership must snap into action. Will this generation respond, or will it be said that it only watched as Adventist education dissolved?

The Problem

Statistics show that enrollment in Adventist K-12 schools has diminished steadily over the past decade while other private schools (or parochial schools in some cases) have experienced an increase in enrollment. In the 1989-90 school year Adventist students made up 1.6% of all K-12 students attending private schools in America. By the 2008-09 school year, they were down to 1.1% of private school students.³ Catholic schools experienced an even more startling decline in enrollment, falling from 54.5% in 1989-90 to 42.5% by 2009.⁴

Conversely, nonsectarian and conservative Christian schools enrollment has increased during this time (nonsectarian schools jumped from 13.2% to 19.4% and conservative Christian school enrollment moved from 10.9% to 15.2%).⁵ The issue of declining enrollment is not a general trend among private schools, yet it is a trend among Adventist schools. Shane Anderson, in *How to Kill an Adventist Education*, suggests that diminishing enrollment in the Adventist system can be linked to a decline in “brand loyalty” in the Adventist church, which he describes as dwindling devotion to church tithe and offering, buying Adventist publications, and consuming Adventist food products – all of which are in sharp decline. High expense and

3 S.P. Broughman, N.L. Swaim, and P.W. Keaton. *Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2007-08 Private School Universe Survey* National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. (Washington, DC, 2009)

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

relatively poor marketing may also be deterrents for parents considering Adventist K-12 schools.⁶ Yet these issues are not unique to Adventism.

According to a recent study conducted by the White House Domestic Policy Council (2008) “There is no villain in the story [of declining enrollment]. No one purposely set about to cause an education crisis. The root causes are several and diffuse... To leave this grave and mounting challenge unaddressed would be irresponsible.”⁷ Though it may be hard to articulate the exact root of the problem, Adventist leadership must begin to develop a solution capable of addressing it in a timely manner.

Problems with Adventist Educational Leadership Structure

Inappropriate leadership training, avoidance of administrative conflict, and the lack of church focus on younger Adventists all contribute to the current lack of growth and prosperity in the Adventist education system. In addition, there are many devoted people working in all levels of Adventist education administration who have fully committed themselves to providing quality education, yet there are problems in the structure of the system that do not allow even the best of intentions and the most abundant resources to affect the needed changes.

Many members of the leadership on the national and regional levels of the North American Division are inappropriately trained to handle the complexities of education administration, complexities that are demonstrated by the decline in enrollment nationwide. Many in the higher echelons are people whose primary training and experience are with the church. Though related to the education system, the church is an organization that requires different skills and experience. The education system needs a body of leadership that is not only

⁶ Anderson, Shane. “How We didn’t Quite Get Into This Mess” in Adventist Review website (2009).

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Preserving a Critical National Asset: America’s Disadvantaged Students and the Crisis in Faith-based Urban Schools (Washington, DC, 2008).

sympathetic to its needs, but also capable fixing its problems. In the process of implementing such a solution, administration members must be open, willing, and able to adjust to change, which may prove to be harder than it seems.

When faced with difficult decisions, it's common for any leadership group to avoid conflict and, in so doing, allow problems to become more severe. In an article titled "A Leadership Dilemma: Skilled Incompetence," Chris Argyris explains a leadership phenomenon he calls "skilled incompetence," in which every member of a leadership team is a capable person, yet to avoid conflict, they may allow problems to persist. If a problem arises and it is not plainly addressed in an effort to preserve peace among leaders and their superiors, no one will see a need for immediate change and the problem will metastasize⁸. Yet, as stated earlier, even if every problem was addressed explicitly, a group of inappropriately trained leaders may still not be able to implement solutions.

**"He that thinketh he LEADTH and hath
no one following him only taketh a walk"**
John Maxwell

Passion and the ability to connect are the most important attributes a leader can possess. Passion provides the motivation to turn theory into reality. The ability to connect those being led (in this case, the students, staff, and faculty of local schools) gives the leader a chance to understand ailments, the willingness to dialogue with others about possible solutions, and the motivation to implement the solutions. The latter of these two attributes is one of which Adventist leadership currently needs more. The NAD is currently and heavily focused on the "greying population," of church members over age 65. According to "The Greying of Adventism," published in *Adventist Today*, the median age of Adventist in North America is currently 51, compared to 36 for all North American residents⁹. Because an older demographic is

8 Chris Argyris. "A leadership dilemma: Skilled incompetence." *Business and Economic Review*, 4.

9 Monte Sahlin. "The Graying of Adventism | Adventist Today." *Adventist Today*. 18 Jan. 2009.

the majority and the largest provider of tithe money, the church focuses time and resources on it.

Parents in their early to mid 30s and the children they currently have in Adventist schools across

America receive less attention, as does the K-12 educational

system as a result because those that attend the schools and those who

send their children represent a smaller portion of the Adventist population.

If the neglect of this age range continues, the educational system will

further deteriorate.

N A D elementary enrollment

1977: 54,567 students

1990: 52,200

2007: 41,280

2008: 41,380

2009: 25,300

2010: 24,200 students

N A D elementary enrollment

The Solutions



While global membership in the Adventist church has grown to over 15 million members, K-12 student enrollment is still below 2 million,¹⁰ yet there is no national solution to the problem. Frankly, there never will be a national solution due to the size and current complexity of the education church system and the cost it would require. Adventist education, like any system of its size, must consider many things when making decisions, reorganizing, and modifying its current structure. As a result, the necessary changes are made slowly. Therefore, the solution to the problem of declining enrollment is twofold. First, the system must immediately address the problems facing the individual K-12 schools in a quick and efficient manner in order to pave the way for the second step of restructuring the system. Any changes made at the higher echelons (i.e. the general conference) take too long to affect the local level and, by the time the changes arrive, the problem has worsened. There is also no funding or

10 Homberto M. Rasi. "Adventist Education in the 21st Century." *The Journal of Adventist Education*, summer 2010.

the necessary organization to support a national solution, for the problems facing each school are diverse and unique.

A M.A.S.H. unit for Adventist education is needed. The first step must be temporary and flexible, yet capable of immediately diagnosing problems and implementing solutions. What worked for the U.S. Army in Korea can also work in Adventist education. The educational M.A.S.H unit would conduct it's own form of "meatball surgery," or the quick, yet effective surgical procedures used to save lives in a hurry. Likewise, each member of the educational M.A.S.H. would solve problems quickly and effectively. The unit would be a temporary council composed of volunteers who have experience in educational administration, technology, marketing, and business administration. The group would be composed of 5 to 10 people per local conference or union, who go from school to school, diagnosing problems and implementing solutions in a bottom-up way to handle individual school's issues. This unit can be quickly made and may address problems at their source. For example, the M.A.S.H. unit would provide fundraising ideas to local administrations and suggest possible investments for the raised funds.

To pay 10 people in every one of the 51 local conference in United States only \$20,000 a year would cost the church over \$10 million each year. The NAD does not have the money to do so. Thus the members of this unit would have to volunteer their contribution, not as a full time position, but as temporary assistance. There are currently many members of the Adventist church – parents or otherwise – who are passionate about seeing the growth and success of Adventist schools and are willing to assist in fixing problems without monetary motivation. Also, there are a number of collegiate teachers and Christian educators that may be willing to contribute their efforts. These groups of people may have the training and experience the system requires. Their contribution in this movement will encourage others to contribute because the units would be

educational revolutions of the people, not an institutional mandate. People connect to democratic ideas more than to a decree from an educational authority.

The second step and ultimate goal of the M.A.S.H. unit is to *implement* necessary changes because, even though a school may have the intentions and resources to make change, the *implementation* may not happen. Primarily, local school administrations must keep schools running. It is difficult to make drastic improvements to their schools simultaneously.

Administrators at Glendale Adventist Academy, for example, cannot be expected to run their school successfully *and* single-handedly reinvent themselves.

An operating room requires a balance of people; too many doctors and not enough nurses creates complications. The same is true of education. “A sustained collaborative effort by educators, elected officials, philanthropists, neighborhood leaders, and many others will be required.”¹¹ In other words, the problem requires a contribution from everyone involved in the educational system as well as the general church community. There are capable administrators currently in the K-12 system that effectively run local schools. This solution does not bypass them, but rather provides them with assistance in a number of areas. The M.A.S.H. unit would give schools solutions to assist current administrations, not to replace them.¹²

Conclusion

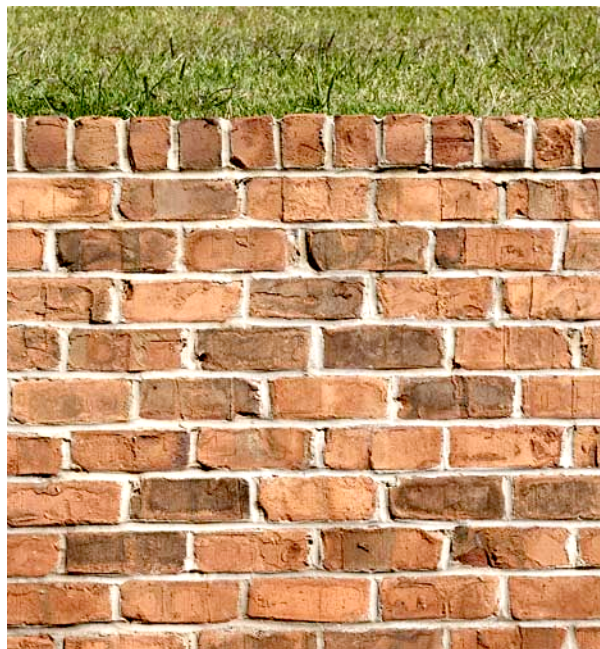
The first step in fixing the Adventist education system is providing medics, not a new hospital. The problems the system faces are diverse and unique to individual schools and, at this point, no grandiose organizational restructuring can provide solutions promptly, nor can they

11 U.S. Department of Education, *Preserving a Critical National Asset: America’s Disadvantaged Students and the Crisis in Faith-based Urban Schools*, Washington, D.C., 2008.

12 The Adventist educational system must gradually reorganize, properly train or replace the current conference-level leadership, and clarify the hierarchy of authority as the second step in the two part solution, but before such a step can be taken, immediate problems on the local level must be addressed. This second step will take massive amounts of time and effort and years of consideration. The focus of the first step is to move the system towards a position in which it can realistically begin the second step.

address new problems. The answer is a small group of successful and committed individuals who are motivated by the perpetuation of the Adventist education system. Education across America, public and private, is looking for a new educational model for management. Adventist education can lead the way.

The problems that face the Adventist education are nothing more than “brick walls,” in the illustration used by Randy Pausch in his lecture “Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” Pausch had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer before gave his “last lecture” for Carnegie Mellon University in which he was encouraged to consider what is truly important.¹³ He explained that in his life he has run into many “brick walls.” “The brick walls are not there to keep us out. [They] are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something.”¹⁴



Will this generation respond quickly to the choppers in the Adventist educational compound, or will it be said that it only watched as the system dissolved?

13 From Randy Pausch information page: "Randy Pausch." Carnegie Mellon University.

14 Randy Pausch, "Achieving Your Childhood Dreams" (lecture, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, Sept. 18, 2007).

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