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The gatekeeper: What if pastors could reverse the decline in church school enrollment?

When I graduated with a theology degree in the mid-1990s, I thought being a pastor meant that I would focus my time only on churches, not schools. I could not have been more wrong.

From my first district (which had a K–10 church school) until my present church (which shares a campus with a 120-student elementary school and a 180-student boarding academy), I have been intimately engaged with Adventist education. And, in spite of the profound challenges that such engagement can bring, I have zero regrets. This has been a profound blessing, and today I cannot imagine doing church ministry without also being involved in a school.

That being said, it is no secret that the global Adventist school system currently faces severe challenges. Much hand-wringing has been done, for instance, regarding the seemingly endless decline in enrollment in North America over the last 30 years. And, yes, I have been one of those hand-wringers.

But my fretting usually goes in a different direction than most others I know. They are primarily, and understandably, concerned about stemming the growing cost of education, overcoming various challenges to educational quality, mastering better marketing techniques, and the like. And, naturally, I share some of these concerns, for they are undeniably

important. But my primary concerns are different, for I believe that the greatest challenges facing Adventist education are not methodological but, rather, pertain to missiology (*why* we do what we do in Adventist education) and personnel (*who* we ask to carry out that task and *why*). Space constraints prohibit me from tackling the missiological concerns in this article. But I will say something about personnel—and be forewarned: what I must say has very little to do with teachers or school administrators.

“But how can that be?” you might ask. “Teachers and administrators are the ones primarily responsible for the dearth of students enrolling in Adventist schools, aren’t they?” This is a fascinating question, one that in my experience we often answer with a seemingly irrefutable “Yes!” After all, conventional wisdom says, there will be improved enrollment when teachers teach better and administrators (for instance) market and recruit better.

But it is my contention that while professional competencies for school employees are crucial, they will yield very, very few long-term dividends by themselves. Why? Because such reform efforts, in my experience, almost universally ignore an entire segment of key education personnel: the gatekeepers.

Who are the gatekeepers?

After spending the last eight years speaking publically to or consulting

privately with more than 10,000 teachers, administrators, and pastors in North, Central, and South America, and throughout the Caribbean, I have come to a firm conclusion: Not principals, not administrators, not teachers, but *pastors are the gatekeepers of Adventist education*. Teachers and administrators are and should be the “kings” and “queens” of the Adventist education “castle.” But pastors are the guards standing at the castle gate, determining who gets into the castle—and who does not. And because of this gatekeeper role, it is my contention that pastors’ influence exceeds that of teachers, principals, administrators, educational vice presidents, conference presidents, and university presidents in determining enrollment levels in Adventist schools. In other words, pastors have more influence on the enrollment in—and therefore, the sustainability of—Adventist schools *than any other single position in the church*.¹

Here are five reasons I believe it to be true.

The reasons

First, it should be self-evident that the majority of potential students who ought to most naturally be drawn to Adventist schools can be found in the pews of Adventist churches. (I remember a conference vice president for education in North America who once

remarked that if even half of the eligible students from Adventist churches in North America were to be enrolled in Adventist schools tomorrow, most of the problems in Adventist education would be removed overnight.) This means—and this is absolutely crucial to understand—that most families who are making educational decisions for their children are first being influenced *not* by the school, its teachers, or its administrators. They are instead first being influenced by the congregation, *and, yes, by the pastor*—which leads to a second point.

A second reason that pastors are the gatekeepers of Adventist education is that the pastor is usually considered to be *the* spiritual leader in the local church. That means he or she can have a formidable impact on the entire spectrum of decisions a family might make, including decisions regarding education. The pastor thus has influence on families making educational decisions that can precede, exceed, and even

completely eclipse that of educational professionals (and, in my experience, this remains true whether a church has a constituent relationship with a school or not).

For instance, at my current assignment, we are blessed to have some exceptionally good teachers and administrators. But when it comes time for families to decide where their children are going to go to school next year, my influence nearly always exceeds that of the staff of the school. If a family is unsure as to whether or not they ought to enroll their student in one of our schools and a teacher or the principal comes to visit with them, the family may or may not enroll their children. But if I go to visit with the family and appropriately encourage them to enroll their children, they nearly always will (in fact, in 13 years at my current church, I have done dozens of such visits, and only failed to enroll the child once). I believe this is not because I am some superman leader but, rather, because

this is simply how church life generally works in the world today: Other leaders have influence, but the local pastor usually has an even greater ability to sway opinion.

A third reason that pastors are the gatekeepers of Adventist education is that they are often the church-board chair. This is extremely important for at least one reason: money. Whatever else a church board does, it most certainly allocates money for ministry, including money to assist families in educating their children. Our local church here, for instance, spends between \$125,000 and \$150,000 annually making Adventist education possible for various families in our congregation. That is a substantial amount—and, no, I am not saying that I, as pastor, am solely responsible for that money being allocated in that way. But it is also undeniable that I do play a very substantial role in shaping our budget, as do all pastors who understand their mandated job description correctly. Notice clearly what this means: Not only

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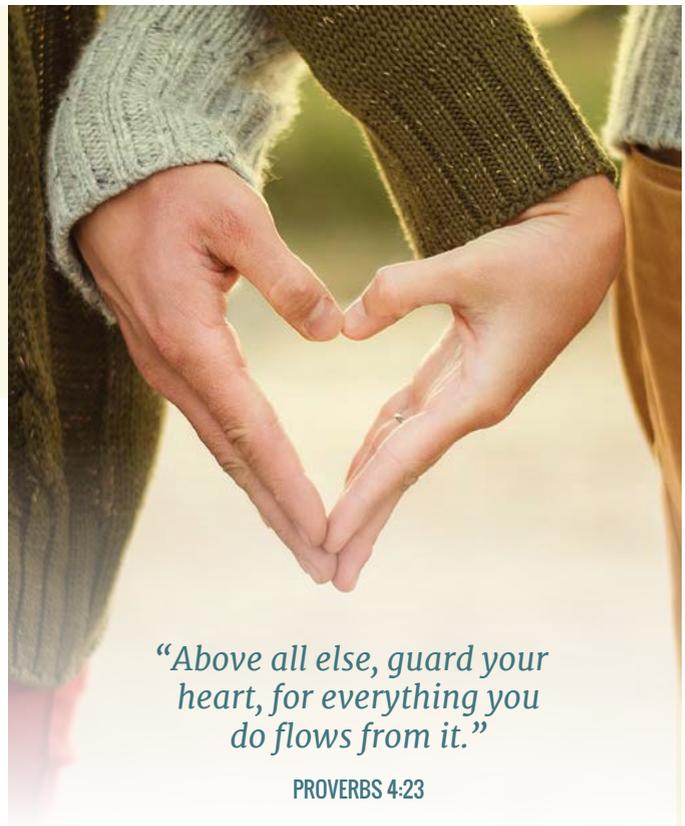
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are pastors able to strongly influence whether or not the children in their church choose to go to an Adventist school, they are also able to strongly influence whether or not those children's parents can actually afford to pay for such schooling. And again, in my experience, this influence precedes and even eclipses any that might come from an educational professional.

A fourth reason pastors are the gatekeepers of Adventist education: they have the pulpit. In terms of effectiveness and regularity, no other medium of communication in the local church comes close. Few people will discuss the school newsletter over Sabbath lunch. But the sermon (for good or for ill!) will almost certainly merit such attention. And if a pastor chooses to either denigrate (which is rare) or ignore (which, in my experience, is incredibly common) Adventist education in his or her sermons, chances are very low that families will choose to send their children to Adventist schools. Conversely, if the pastor chooses to actively highlight the supreme virtues of Adventist education during his or her sermons, and to do so on a regular basis, the chances are high that families will choose to send their children to Adventist schools. And, again, note: no teacher, no administrator, nor any other position in the Adventist Church has access to such an influential medium with such regularity.

Fifth, unlike any other leader employed by the Adventist Church, pastors usually have substantial influence in every leg of what has traditionally been called "The Three-legged Stool": that union between the church, the home, and the school. A principal, for instance, may have influence with church members who have students in his or her school. But the pastor will usually have influence not only with those families but also with the rest of the families in the church who do not have any family ties with the school. This phenomenon thus represents a locus of influence that no other leader has, influence that could be used to make a powerful, positive difference in Adventist education.

But what's in it for me?

Many pastors, after hearing me talk about them being the gatekeepers of Adventist education, are understandably cautious. "OK, I get it," they say, in essence. "But I'm incredibly busy already, and I can't imagine taking on the task of advocating for Adventist education." In other words, why should I do this? There are many reasons, but I will share just five.

First, pastors whose churches become active constituents of an Adventist school may end up with more money to do ministry—as well as more members and attendees—than pastors who do not. Larry Blackmer, current vice president of education for the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, tells the story of how, years ago, he did a five-year study of all the Adventist churches in Michigan. He found that during that five-year period, all churches actively supporting an Adventist school had increased in tithe, attendance, and membership. Conversely, all churches that did not actively support an Adventist school declined in tithe, attendance, and membership.

Does this guarantee that your church will prosper if it actively supports a school? No. But Dr. Blackmer's study—as well as the personal experience of dozens of pastors I have met who live outside of Michigan—indicates there is definitely something about supporting Adventist education that can lead to more money, attendees, and members.

Second, pastors who strongly support Adventist education will likely have more disciples in their church than those who do not. Why? Because when done correctly, *Adventist education is discipleship*. Our primary calling as pastors is to make disciples of Christ. In my experience, Adventist education, properly done, helps me to make disciples in ways that are better formulated, more engaging, and more permanent than anything I could ever do on my own. In light of this, Adventist education can actually save time for pastors who support schools, for they do not carry the discipleship burden by themselves.

Third, done correctly, a strong Adventist education program for your members' children can enable those children to do at least two things. First, they can avoid the dangers of a secular or non-Adventist education (dangers that are substantial: evolutionary theory, the diminution of the Sabbath, moral relativism, etc.). Second, those students are much more likely to learn to become Adventist missionaries for Christ—and what pastor would not want more such people in his or her church?

Fourth, a strong connection to an Adventist school can help your church become what might be called a "life center"—that is, a place where Adventists and potential Adventists of *all ages* gather for fellowship, study, evangelism, encouragement, friendship making, et cetera. This dynamic occurs because an Adventist school brings an element of cross-generational ministry to a local church that is very difficult to otherwise achieve. I have seen this happen repeatedly in my own church, as well as in a multitude of others, and it brings incredible energy to the life of the church!

Fifth, most pastors realize that churches with high morale tend to bring in not only more money but also generate more willing volunteers than churches with low morale. So note the cycle: Good schools often make for happy churches; happy churches naturally are more attractive to new members; new members mean more ministry, more money, more volunteer hours, et cetera. I have seen this cycle happen over and over in my own and countless other churches that support Adventist schools.

OK, I am convinced. Now what?

What should a pastor do who takes his or her gatekeeper role seriously?

First, *regularly and passionately give your members strong, biblical, and compelling reasons to be Seventh-day Adventist Christians*. If members have such reasons to belong to the Adventist Church, they will almost certainly have reasons to send their children to Adventist schools as well.

Money—including money to pay for big Adventist school tuition bills—follows vision but rarely precedes it. Convince your members of the Adventist vision, and the case for Adventist education will be abundantly easier to make.

Second, *preach regularly and without reservation about the necessity of Adventist education.* I believe Adventist education was divinely ordained. I, thus, do not preach about Adventist schools as though they are optional but, rather, as being essential to the development of—and, in many cases, even the salvation of—our children. I do not equivocate on this point. Instead, I appropriately, passionately, and clearly preach of the necessity of children attending Adventist schools. This is part of the reason why for more than a decade at my church, we have never dipped below 92 percent of our eligible students attending Adventist schools.

Third, *visit personally with families who have children eligible for Adventist schools.* This is not a substitute for teachers visiting prospective families. But with your influence, you can sway families that are on the fence teachers sometimes cannot.

Fourth, *get to know the school—its students, teachers, needs, etc.—and become its number one advocate.* This advocacy takes place in public discourse, private conversations, on the school board, on the church board, when working with conference officials, when talking to parents, and so on. Will this take some time in your schedule? Yes. But such advocacy generally pays off more handsomely than it ever costs in that it can yield more money, more volunteers, greater church member enthusiasm, higher membership, increased attendance, higher morale, and, ultimately, vastly improved missional effectiveness. (Perhaps those

who say Adventist education is “too expensive” have not tried to live without it!)

A profound blessing

It has been a profound blessing for me to partner with Adventist schools throughout my ministry. How about you, Pastor? Are you currently supporting an Adventist school? If so, use your influence to fill it with students. Is there no Adventist school nearby? Find the nearest one, no matter how far, and adopt this school. Make it your church’s special mission outreach. After all, you are the gatekeeper of Adventist education—one of the most influential and effective discipleship methods ever devised—and there is a line of people at the gate waiting for you to invite them in. ¹

1 For an expanded video presentation by the author on the pastor’s role as gatekeeper, see <https://vimeo.com/181066120>.

5 ways to encourage youth in Total Member Involvement

1. Encourage youth to develop a personal relationship with Jesus through daily time in the Word, time in prayer, and through active witnessing and evangelism. Show them by example what true faith, authentic Christianity, and discipleship look like. Encourage them to seek higher ideals for God’s honor and glory.

2. Encourage youth to be creative as they seek to follow biblical principles by finding ways to be part of Total Member Involvement. Ellen White writes, “Never, never feel the slightest disturbance because the Lord is raising up youth to lift and carry the heavier burdens and proclaim the message of truth.” Remember, youth are not inhibited by the same limitations that we often are as adults. Because of this, they dream big, pray big, and plan big!

3. While we mentor our young people, do not try to control them too tightly or hold them back from moving forward with producing good biblical fruit (Matt. 7:17, Phil. 4:8). As we get closer to the end of time, God will use simple means, which we do not expect, to accomplish His great purposes. Let us not discourage our youth as they seek to do great things for God.

4. Look for active ways to encourage youth in their many different endeavors to be involved and lead out. Get them involved in making decisions, leading out in evangelism and preaching, and rallying the support of their fellow youth in sharing the gospel. Ellen White tells us, “Make [the youth] feel that they are expected to do something. The Lord chooses them because they are strong.” We

underestimate what godly young people can accomplish for God’s glory.

5. Finally, pray with youth and encourage them to pray for one another and their churches. Ask them to pray that those who have left the church can be reclaimed, unbelievers would find the truth, and the proclamation of the three angels’ messages can go forward, opening the way for the outpouring of the latter rain. “With such an army of workers as our youth, rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Saviour might be carried to the whole world!” Let’s get ready! Jesus is coming soon! ¹

—Ted N. C. Wilson, PhD, is the president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

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