La Sierra University Granted Window to Show its Faithfulness to Church’s Creation Belief

Educate Truth shares the following article published by the Adventist News Network as a service to readers.

By Mark A. Kellner

La Sierra University (LSU), a Seventh-day Adventist Church-owned school in Riverside, California, will have a year to demonstrate its faithfulness to church teaching on creation, at which time its current accreditation by the Adventist Accrediting Association, or AAA, will be reviewed. The school’s denominational accreditation has been extended to December 31 of next year, with reaccreditation subject to an on-site review by a AAA panel in the second quarter of 2012, and AAA board action in October 2012.

The unusual action followed two years of controversy that has roiled the southeastern California campus and generated extensive comment by Seventh-day Adventist leaders and members across North America and the world church. The La Sierra decision, during which a wide range of options were debated, came among several actions taken the regular biennial AAA board meeting held at the General Conference’s headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, on April 4, 2011.

“Although La Sierra University has deviated from the philosophy and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education,” the voted action reads, “it is moved that the university be granted an extension of accreditation to December 31, 2012 in order for the university to act upon its commitments and implement changes and enhancements” involving the teaching of origins at the school. The action extending the university’s current term of accreditation did not address the prospect of a new term, up to five years in length.
Accrediting executives’ rationale

“This was a challenging and complex decision,” said Lisa M. Beardsley, director of the General Conference Education Department. “The AAA board took into consideration the report of the AAA team that visited the campus in November 2010, and events that have transpired since, such as the actions of the institutional board, the finding of its special subcommittee, and the open letter published in March by the university. After careful and prayerful consideration, the board expressed its will as a body by means of a written ballot so that all views could be honored.”

Ella Smith Simmons, a general vice president of the world church and member of the AAA board, said, “Given the recent acknowledgement made by the La Sierra University board and administration, this action seeks to create a bridge for the university to meet its stated commitments and the accrediting requirements to give priority to the standards of Seventh-day Adventist education in harmony with the Church’s official beliefs.”

“The AAA Board has attempted to find a balance between punitive and redemptive help to the university in support of the LSU Board’s recent statements,” added Larry Blackmer, vice president for Education of the North American Division and another AAA board member.

Membership in the Adventist Accrediting Association board includes the director and associate directors of the General Conference Education department; General Conference vice presidential advisers for education; directors of education from each of the church’s 13 world divisions; one representative each from a college/university board chair; a college/university president; an academic vice president or dean; a registrar or admissions officer; a finance officer; an academic department chair of education; a union conference education director; and a local conference education director. Also included are three individuals with international Adventist educational experience; two education specialists not employed by the church; and the General Conference officers — specifically the president, secretary and treasurer.

What lies ahead

In order to retain AAA accreditation, the school administration and board of trustees will, among other steps, have to demonstrate that it is honoring its commitments to “continue to endorse the official Seventh-day Adventist Church statement on creation”; “resource and nurture faculty in an atmosphere in which official Seventh-day Adventist Church positions on creation and origins are taught and honored”; so that the Church’s creation position “is presented in instructional contexts” and also is “presented as the university’s position on origins.”

The university will also have to show it is fulfilling its pledge to develop “specific goals” to assist “LSU students of other faiths to find meaning in and understanding of Seventh-day Adventist values and official beliefs, including those regarding creation and human origins.” According to one of the examples set forth in the voted action, “decisions regarding faculty appointments and development [must be] aligned with board and university commitments to ensure the acceptance and teaching of official Seventh-day Adventist beliefs regarding creation and origins within instructional and co-curricular contexts.”

The AAA is also requiring that LSU’s “board governance structure and function are enhanced to provide fuller participation in its fiduciary responsibility for the university,” again, in keeping with a commitment the school has made.

Decision was a surprise
Following a protracted discussion that lengthened a scheduled three-hour meeting into four hours, the AAA board voted to extend the school’s current church-based accreditation, but did not offer the full new term La Sierra had anticipated. On February 8, La Sierra announced a AAA site visit team’s recommendation “that ‘in their opinion, and subject to AAA approval, La Sierra University should receive the maximum accreditation possible under AAA guidelines.’” The school has since removed that statement from its website.

The accreditation issue — which includes denominational recognition by the church and qualifies a school for certain appropriations from denominational funds — arose following a two-year controversy over La Sierra’s teachings on human origins. Beginning in 2009, critics, including some church leaders, laypersons and LSU students claimed that the school taught the theory of evolution to biology students as the explanation for the origin of life.

Seventh-day Adventists believe “God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made ‘the heaven and the earth’ and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week,” as noted in the church’s Fundamental Beliefs.

La Sierra responds

In a statement to Adventist Review, La Sierra spokesman Larry Becker said, “Although La Sierra University has taken affirmative steps toward resolution of the controversy regarding how creation and evolution are taught in its classes, the AAA Board believed that it is necessary for more time to transpire in order for the university board, faculty, and administration to demonstrate its determination to put in place the steps that the faculty and administration have agreed with the board to implement.”

The LSU statement continued: “University administration appreciates the extension of its current full accreditation as a Seventh-day Adventist university through December 31, 2012. The AAA Board has outlined a specific process moving forward, and we recognize the need for these steps. We look forward to the AAA visit to our campus next year. The board, administration and faculty are already working together to ensure that we provide the outstanding Adventist education desired by our students, our constituents, and our Church.”

La Sierra President Randal R. Wisbey and Ricardo Graham, Pacific Union Conference president and La Sierra trustee board chairman, admitted La Sierra’s shortcomings on the subject in a March 9 open letter.

“We found that only 50 percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view of creation was presented, and only 40 percent agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view was supported,” Wisbey and Graham wrote. “This is not acceptable, and we apologize,” they added.

Further, “instruction at the university, while being strong in many areas, has not adequately presented the denomination’s position on the subject of creation,” according to the document.

And, “there is some evidence that students have not always been respected for their belief in the Biblical creation position,” the March 9 La Sierra statement said.

According to the AAA’s accreditation handbook, “Accreditation of an institution by AAA signifies that the institution has a purpose appropriate to service the educational needs of those in its constituency and has the resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish the institution’s goals.”

School’s history
Founded in 1922 as a Seventh-day Adventist academy, La Sierra grew over the years and became a full-fledged college in 1946. In 1967, it merged with Loma Linda University and became that school’s liberal arts wing, reorganizing as an independent institution in 1990.

In 2010, the school reported 2,098 students had registered at the start of the current school year. Last year’s registration of 440 freshman surpassed 2009’s freshman class of 348 by 26.4 percent, La Sierra said in a statement.