



Merge 14 North American Colleges Into Two? Yes!

An acute crisis demands heroically courageous action.

by Frank Knittel

ADVENTISTS OUGHT TO REDUCE THEIR 14 senior colleges in the United States to two—Andrews University in the East, and a university in the West with a reorganized La Sierra and Loma Linda at its core. At the same time, Adventists ought to keep open only a fraction of the academies we now run and close many of the elementary schools we operate. The result of consolidation would mean we could provide the highest quality of education at less than half the current price. Adventist families could afford to provide their children with a superb Adventist education. But prompt action must be taken, or our colleges—possibly our unions in North America, even the General Conference—could be forced into involuntary bankruptcy.

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Why I Care So Much

I am a product of Adventist education and I have devoted my career to being a teacher and administrator in the system. My education in Adventist elementary schools in the San Joaquin Valley of California was so good that when I was put into public school I was allowed to skip the fifth grade.

My subsequent educational preparation at Southwestern Junior College (now Southwestern Adventist University) and at Union College was superb. Not only did their training permit me to do well in my entrance exams to the graduate English program at the University of Minnesota, but I also found myself ahead of student colleagues in every area except the novel. My fellow graduate students had not, for example, benefited from my classes at Union College in classical Greek.

I further believe that my decision to devote myself to Adventist colleges and universities was a response to a divine call. After graduate school, while still in my 20s, I vowed to make

public education my vocation. From the perspective of my family, our home in Colorado was Eden. Suddenly, a serpent appeared in the garden—Floyd Rittenhouse, then president of Emmanuel Missionary College, and soon to be president of Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. When I received a letter from Dr. Rittenhouse, asking me to come to the university, I wrote a very courteous letter, declining the offer. Ten days later another letter came. I sent a second letter, apologizing that my first letter had not reached him, and again declining to visit Berrien Springs. Ten days later, a third missive from Dr. Rittenhouse arrived. He was delighted that I was so interested in coming to Michigan that I had taken moments from my precious time to write two letters. Again, I responded—no euphemistic language this time. I told him that I had no interest in making a change and that he should not bother to be in further touch with me.

Then he called. When he identified himself, I was grimly determined to get this man off my back. Then he struck me where it hurt. “If we are willing to pay your air fare to come visit us before you completely make up your mind, don’t you have it in your heart to donate no more than two days of your time?”

I visited Berrien Springs the following week. Dr. Paul Gibbs, from the English department, picked me up in South Bend, Indiana. A half hour later, we drove through a short block of what looked like little Mom-and-Pop businesses. I innocently inquired, “How far is it to Berrien Springs?”

Gibbs responded, “We just went through it.”

During my stay on the campus, I said very little, asked a few questions. But something was stirring within me—the students walking back and forth, the mid-morning chapel program, the absence of the lewd, the tawdry, the profane, the very presence of a spirit way out there in the middle of the apple orchards of Berrien County.

The next day, Dr. Rittenhouse and Dr. Gibbs both took me to the airport. Some time later, Dr. Gibbs told me that on their way to the campus Rittenhouse said, “Well, I guess this is a lost cause. He said hardly anything while he was here.”

By the time I got on the plane to go home, I knew we were moving to Michigan. But how would this affect my wife, who was steadfastly opposed to the change? I mentally tried out all sorts of scenarios. Perhaps the first day after my return I could casually say that Michigan was not all bad, but Colorado had wonderful points as well. Then maybe the second day the comments about Michigan would be more emphasized and Colorado would be downplayed. After a few days of this I might bring her around. Then I remembered her once saying that if I moved to Michigan, she hoped I would write her in Colorado.

My desperate hope was that she would be asleep and the moment of truth would come in the morning. No such luck. She greeted my coming into the bedroom by sitting bolt upright. Her question was so predictable—“Well, how did it go?!” I don’t know what happened to all my little, pretty speeches. I just blurted out, “We’re moving to Michigan!” There was a long pause, and for a second I wondered if after only three years of marriage I was going to spend my first night in the study. Then Helen said very quietly, “I’ve been praying all day that you would make that decision.”

Helen and I have never backed away from that commitment. For many years, she and I have offered the hospitality of our home free of charge to students who otherwise would not have been able to attend an Adventist college. We are passionately devoted to the continued existence and welfare of our schools. My years teaching and administering in Adventist colleges have been rewarding ones, including the recent, sublimely happy days at La Sierra University.

Why the Church Began Its Elementary Schools

It is not possible to evaluate properly the present or the future of Adventist education without first understanding the beginnings of the grand and expansive—and expensive—experiment of educating people under the umbrella of our church. Ellen White, our primary church pioneer, took the lead. Some of her far-reaching recommendations are misunderstood today.

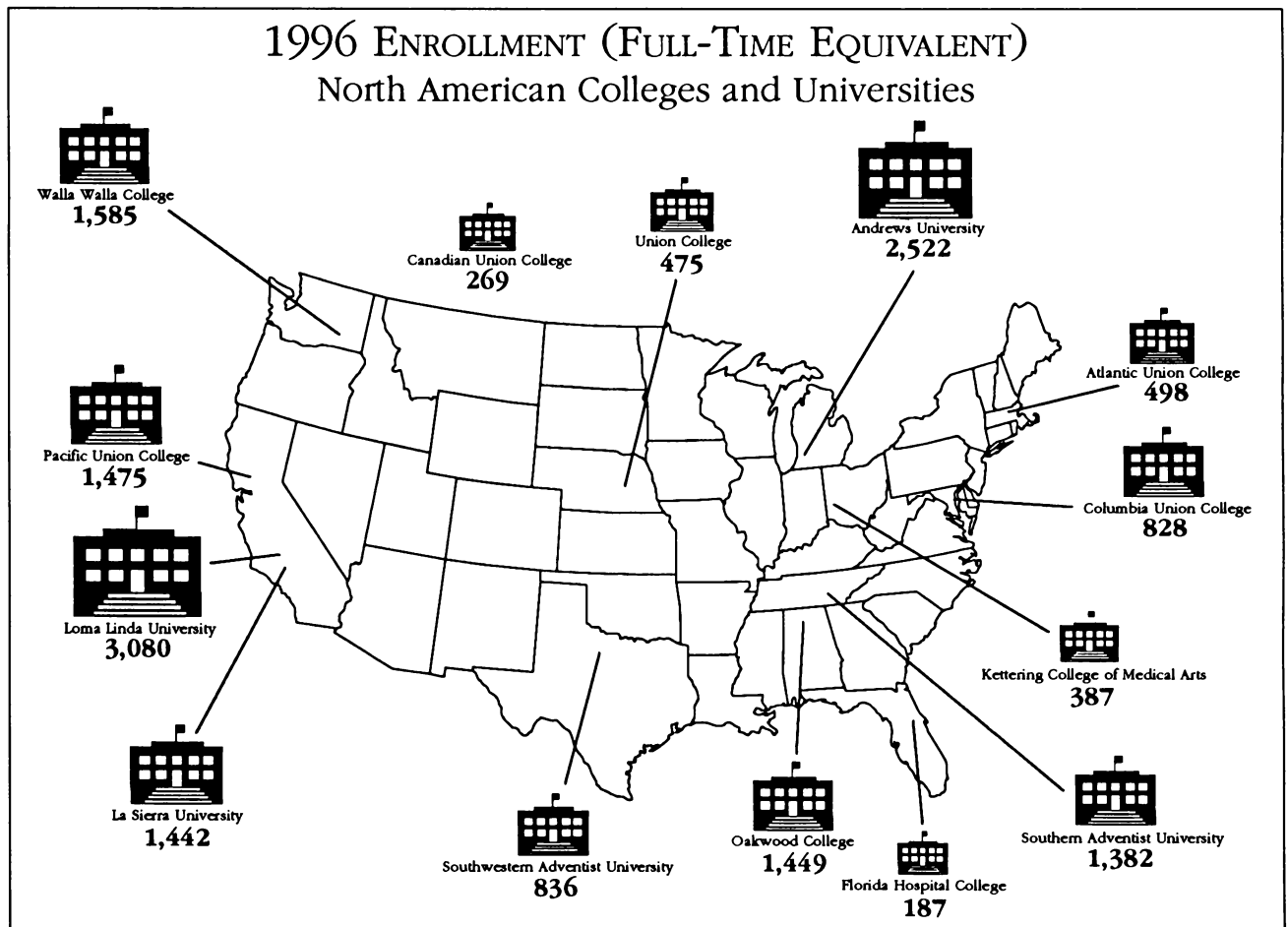
She stated more than once in her writings—and presumably in her speaking—that if there are two or three children in a family who need to be educated, or if several families in close proximity to one have a few children, the family or families should provide for education. If the parents could not do the teaching,

then they should secure the services of someone who could.

In those days, many rural children in America were taught mainly by young women with no more than an eighth-grade education. Some had less. When young women in the mid- and later 1800s finished the eighth grade, they often were delighted to be employed in homes where they taught primer-level students the basics of the three R's. These same young people often also helped with domestic chores, with very little compensation beyond room and board. They were sometimes almost slaves.

These young teachers often moved from home to home in order to spread around the burden of room and board. It was therefore possible for families to educate their children in the lower grades for very little cost.

To be sure, there were numerous regular formal schools, but many children had no



opportunity to attend these. They had no chance to learn other than at home. This home education was strictly on the elementary level. I have never read a statement from Ellen White discussing boarding academies. However, we can assume she approved of them; by the time of her death, church boarding academies existed across the country. During the lifetime of Ellen White, my parents both attended those early schools.

What is often not understood is that when Ellen White was speaking about little schools of two or three students, she was undoubtedly thinking about an education for the largely rural children making up most of the Adventist homes. She had a passion for literacy, and her plan sought to minimize academic ignorance in the Christian home. Many people agreed with Ellen White's recommendations, but the only way they could fulfill God's plan for their children was to hire in-home teachers for little or no money.

Two problems arose. First, in the many little schools that sprang up, the teachers were the least expensive, and hence the least trained, that could be found. The near absence of money for educational matters also meant that teachers had virtually no resources for even basic educational tools.

Second, an attitude emerged that teachers in our schools ought to prove their moral, spiritual, and professional worth by submitting to inconvenience, long hours, and short pay. This naturally gave rise to the long-standing concept that church education does not need a systematic method of financial support.

Today, in little Adventist elementary schools, there is usually no money for special assistance for the learning disabled, for students having problems in math and reading, for adequate libraries, for serious science education. In an age when many preschoolers have never heard of a home without a computer, students in our small schools either have no

computers, or access only to obsolete cast-offs. Grounds are often shabby and buildings careworn, often held up by little more than paint.

Today, a host of these elementary schools should not exist. I have heard the cries that small elementary schools are desirable because students genuinely get to know their teachers, teachers know all their students by name, as well as their parents. All that is true, but it is not a substitute for what our teachers need in order to provide the education they are trained to provide. I am embarrassed to say that, in some instances, our children would be far better off in public schools.

How Academies Got Started And Hardly Ever Close

Within the minds of a critical mass of Adventists, Ellen White's charge that everyone should go to school was gradually transformed into the belief that the Adventist Church should educate every one of its young people, from first grade through college. Hence, the church established academies to fill the gap between home—or church—schools and Battle Creek College.

In those early days of Adventism, through the first part of this century, difficult transportation decreed location. Boarding academies were located as close as possible to where prospective students lived. As a result, Adventist academies proliferated. Today, poor judgment sometimes perpetuates boarding academies where they are not truly needed, and day academies where they cannot be properly supported financially.

Boarding academies are often monuments to our passion for competition. Let me illustrate. Until the late 1940s, Enterprise Academy, located in Kansas, served both Kansas and Missouri, and had a roaring 250 students. The Missouri Conference decided in 1946 that it

had to have its own boarding academy. What happened? The predictable. Each academy ended up with a little more than 100 students. Both schools continue to languish in lamentable poverty.

Day academies can exacerbate the problem of proliferation. Instead of investing in school buses to transport children half an hour to an established school, San Pasqual Academy, the Southeastern California Conference, for reasons never logically defined, permitted the San Diego and Escondido churches to run their own 12-grade schools. These schools are chronically short of library books, other educational materials, and funds. (I have visited the libraries of every academy in the Southern and Southeastern California conferences, and only one or two of them can claim even a semblance of needed library holdings.) At the same 12-grade day schools, tuition is at least double what it ought to be. Similarly, within easy commuting distance of Loma Linda Academy, two churches were permitted to open their own 12-grade schools. One, in 1996, fell behind on its debt to the conference office by some \$160,000.

In all of these instances—and many more—money spent to keep alive several schools, instead of one, ought to have been dedicated to maintaining fewer schools at a high level of excellence, while dramatically reducing the present exorbitantly high tuition rates.

I know of no boarding or day academy that is funded as it should be. Within the past year, I have been in the residence halls of half a dozen academies—one of these the largest boarding academy in North America. The condition of the average physical plant of these academies is somewhere between deplorable and morally criminal.

We need to reduce the number of our boarding academies to a fraction of the number we have. For example, one boarding school in California could handle the students that the Rio Linda, Monterey Bay, and San

Pasqual academies now enroll. West of the Mississippi River, three boarding academies could handle all the students now attending the many academies that currently exist in that region.

Similarly, many of our day academies ought to be shut down or amalgamated into single units. By way of illustration, in the Los Angeles area, Orangewood, Lynwood, Glendale, and San Gabriel academies are barely hanging on by their fingernails. They ought to be integrated into one school, with bus services, if necessary.

If the people in our churches were really interested in making Christian education available for their families, they would invest the money slated for new facilities, and from the returns on this investment they could send their children to improved schools at a very much reduced fee. The tuition cost for all our academies is unconscionable. By consolidating fixed costs, reducing capital needs, and vastly improving the student cost/tuition ratio, we could have better education for far, far lower tuition charges to Adventist families.

Why We Must Consolidate 14 Colleges Into Two North American Universities

When Adventist colleges in North America were built, transportation and local pride dictated that each union conference develop its own college. By the first quarter of the 20th century, we had organized half a dozen colleges, two foreign language seminaries, and several secondary schools that ultimately became colleges. Now, we have 12 senior colleges and universities, and two junior colleges operated by the Kettering Adventist hospital in Ohio, and the Florida Hospital near Orlando.

A majority of these colleges could accommodate much greater enrollments. Fixed capital expenses continue, and so do more or less

fixed operating losses. Many of the physical plants are in serious decline. Although the colleges frantically beat the bushes for students, flat or dropping enrollments have been a major factor in skyrocketing tuition charges. Not one Adventist college in America has the minimum funding needed to make that school what it could and should be to provide students a truly excellent education.

Our colleges have countered sagging enrollments by continuing broad admissions policies. Sheer economic survival has dictated admissions practices that have seriously eroded the academic reputations of Adventist higher education. This is true, despite the fact that Ellen White was very clear that all students in our schools have a decided responsibility to be superior scholars, to master their disciplines. Sadly, these calls of hers to be intellectually great were almost totally ignored, replaced by cries of vocal constituents to have gardens and farms and teachers working with students in strawberry patches. Now, all of our colleges are plagued with a disconcerting number of students who by either personal choice or level of ability are not college material.

We sometimes try to minimize our plight by anecdotal data. We point out that many of our students have achieved high professional and intellectual standings: they have gone on to the most glittering graduate schools in the land, they have made their marks in both the secular and spiritual world. We applaud all of them for that. But the clear fact remains, that when a critical mass of our students enter on the lower edge academically, we have only

three choices. The first is to offer a slate of remedial classes to bring them up to some sort of college level. The second is to cut them out quickly when they do not perform up to an acceptable college level. The third is to bring our teaching level down to their level, so that they can finally graduate.

I have heard through the years that we should admit non-eager and non-performing enrollees, and then if they don't make the cut, that is their affair. Cut them out. Sorry, but it does not work that way. Every time we admit a student, we give tacit affirmation that we

believe the student is good college potential. That affirmation constitutes the beginning of an obligation on our part to that student. Every day, every quarter or semester that student is enrolled, our obligation increases. Moreover, in spite of the fact that we do not like to admit it, we, like all other colleges and universities, do indeed enroll and then teach for a common denomi-

nator among our students.

Not for a moment do I decry the plain fact that families want their children in an Adventist college for social reasons. Many come to our colleges for the express purpose of finding mates. Such reasons and others are commendable, provided students also come in order to become scholars worthy of the name. We like to tell ourselves that we turn away numbers of students because of low test scores and/or low grades. In actuality, the number of Adventist young people we turn away for purely academic reasons is so small as to be almost insignificant. Statistics vary from school to school, of course, but the general picture is

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The first goal of our colleges is to provide superior education—superior intellectual attainment, superior spiritual reality, superior student-teacher relationships, and superior conduct. Tragically, most Adventists do not understand the importance of intellectual attainment.

Based on almost five decades of experience as a teacher and administrator in our church educational system, it is my strong belief that members do not understand, because they have not often—if at all—heard sermons from pastors in their churches, nor read essays by denominational leaders in our church papers, explaining the spiritual value of academic excellence. Consequently, if Adventists were asked to list the purposes of Adventist colleges, most would put academic matter in a weak second, third, or fourth place.

How often through the years have I heard major church leaders at camp meetings or workers' meetings, make a statement such as, "Now, I am not an educated man. I do not have one of those Ph.D.s that some others have. I am just a simple man of the gospel." Members capture the message being virtually shouted at them: No one can be educated and also be a person of the gospel. Adventist college and university campuses are objects of suspicion, grudgingly tolerated, eagerly criticized. The last General Conference president who openly and avowedly championed intellectual excellence as a necessity in Adventist higher education was R. R. Figuhr, during whose administration Andrews University came into being.

If Adventist colleges and universities are to assure upwardly mobile Adventist families that their children will receive a truly superb academic education, they must be able to invest more to reach even minimum levels in basic educational resources. We ask students to do research, but since a number of our colleges were deliberately placed where civi-

lization would not reach them, it is often difficult, even impossible for them to peruse adequate libraries. (When I was at Andrews, the closest significant library in my field was in Chicago.) Adventist schools need to spend money building up their academic resources. Instead, the president of one of our colleges told his faculty during 1996 that the total amount that would be spent the following year for new library books was \$5,000. (He did not want to be stingy; he was following instructions from his board to cut operating costs by more than \$1 million.)

If members are to be confident that Adventist colleges can provide excellent education, Adventist colleges must be able to retain superb teachers. On every Adventist college campus (and at Andrews University), the average underpayment of teachers is a minimum of \$150,000 for every 10 teachers on the faculty. For schools of 150 full-time teachers, this comes to \$500,000 a year. Even if we lowered our estimate to \$10,000 a year for each teacher, not one of our colleges comes within cannon range of that expenditure. That does not mean that there are no good faculties at Adventist colleges. But it does mean that our colleges are presently staying afloat only because they do not pay their teachers a living wage and spend very little on necessary educational resources.

Of course, rumors persist that some Adventist colleges in North America will not keep their heads above water. There has been the almost terminal crisis in the condition of Atlantic Union College. Reports persist that Columbia Union College and Union College are gasping for life. Southern, which is in better financial shape, has recently renamed itself Southern Adventist University, and voted to begin two M.A. programs—in education and in business—even though the school simply does not have the resources to become a university. Southwestern is in better financial circumstances than some other Adventist col-

leges, but its also adopting the *university* tag makes no sense unless it can raise an endowment of \$200 million.

Not to improve academically, but simply to stay alive, Adventist colleges have raised tuition to exorbitant levels. While creating guilt among those who refuse to accept horrendous financial obligations, we bleed our Adventist families dry. We need to reduce tuition costs at our colleges by 50 to 60 percent. If the Mormons can support a major university, Brigham Young, by charging only \$2,450 a year for tuition, Adventists can certainly provide college education for no more than double that amount. But not with the proliferation of colleges we now have. The only way members can become proud of the excellence of North American Adventism's schools of higher education, and also afford their tuition charges, is for members to demand that the North American church realistically and decisively concentrate its resources at two universities.

Where Should We Build Up Two Superb Universities?

The Adventist university in the East must be Andrews. Better judgment might have decreed that Andrews be situated on the East Coast rather than in the orchards of Michigan. But it is there, and we have too much invested in it—including a still-inadequate library—to move it once again. Within 600 miles of Andrews are several Adventist colleges that should be closed, with the best of their faculties and staff grafted on to the Andrews University structure.

The West provides even greater challenges and opportunities. It is a monumental waste of church resources to have six major higher educational centers west of the Mississippi River. Loma Linda University has a gigantic start toward being a full university of the first

order. At the present time it is a specialized science institution, rather than a university in the traditional sense. That is not meant pejoratively. The *Queen Elizabeth II* is not an aircraft carrier, but it is a majestic ocean liner.

At the moment, passions probably still run too high from the previous attempt to try combining La Sierra and Loma Linda. Norman Woods, who staked his job as president of Loma Linda on the attempt, had a vision of what a genuine university ought to be. I do believe that he should have insisted, from the start, that the administrative center of the new university be located at La Sierra for a cost of much less than \$1 million, rather than moving the La Sierra operation to Loma Linda at a cost of many millions of dollars. Woods' attempt failed, but not because the problems were imponderable.

If it were patterned after what a true university ought to be, the union of the Loma Linda and La Sierra campuses would be a non-issue. Distance between the two schools is negligible. (It takes longer to find parking at Loma Linda than it takes to drive there from the La Sierra campus.) The one-time merger of La Sierra College and the College of Medical Evangelists could have been a glorious experience. It would be again if, in addition, the human resources of Pacific Union College and Walla Walla College faculties could also be incorporated into a first-rate Adventist university on the West Coast.

Some may think that drastic action is unnecessary, that the church in North America will grow itself out of its problems. They cling to a mirage. The growth in the North American church is largely among first- and second-generation immigrants. As a group, they have no financial resources to even begin to resolve our educational financial problems. No signs on the horizon suggest that they will ever do so.

Other Adventists may be numbed by the conviction that God led us in the past and will again lead us out of our quandary, without our

having to make excruciatingly difficult decisions. I hold earnestly that, in our quest for Christian education, God worked miracles on our behalf in the past. But I just as earnestly believe that past miracles are no reason for present indecision.

I do not go into further detail as to how to make the broad, sweeping, and hard changes that must be made to rescue Adventist education in North America. In North America we are caught in a vise. Our capital investment needs are astonishing. Our yearly operating costs are almost beyond calculation. As a result, student charges are staggering, and beyond the reach of a majority of Adventist young people. Action must be taken by a group of leaders from across the North American Adventist Church who are

unswayed by constituency passions. We should have resolved these problems when it was obvious they were beginning. Now, the crisis is so acute, heroically courageous action must be taken.

I do not for a moment regret devoting my life to Adventist colleges and universities. My commitment is as intense as when my wife and I first felt the call to leave the university where we were and go to an Adventist campus in Michigan. Indeed, my passion for what Adventist education can be is precisely why I plead with North American Adventists to make the wrenching decisions confronting Adventist higher education—before the present crisis becomes insurmountable and we lose our entire system of higher education.