



Merge 14 North American Colleges Into Two? No!

Diversity and local autonomy advance the Adventist mission.

by Lawrence T. Geraty

THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY I DO NOT wish to argue with Frank Knittel's broad-stroke history and analysis of the crisis in Adventist education: He set the standard when it comes to being a successful college president; now on my faculty he serves as a valuable mentor and friend; and he has articulated a defensible point of view cogently as befits a keen mind who has mastered the English language. While his diagnosis of some very real problems within Adventist higher education is probably correct and he has made

some very helpful suggestions, I do not believe one can proceed from his particular examples to his prescription for the future. It is primarily with the prescription that I differ.

I will first suggest why I do not think paring our number of colleges down to two is the right way to go. Then I will suggest why, even if it were the right way to go, it would not work. Finally, I propose my assessment of the future for North America's Adventist colleges and universities.

Why Only Two Colleges Is Not a Good Idea

As proud as I am of Andrews University (an institution where, for 22 years, I was either a student or faculty member) and as proud as I could be of a reorganized Loma Linda/La Sierra University (where I soon will have given four years), and even considering the possibility that it might in some way "enhance my career," what follows are rea-

Lawrence T. Geraty, president and professor of archaeology at La Sierra University, in Riverside, California, since 1993, was president of Atlantic Union College in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, from 1985 to 1993. For 13 years prior to that he taught Hebrew Bible, archaeology, and the history of antiquity at Andrews University's SDA Theological Seminary, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where he founded the Institute of Archaeology and named its archaeology museum for his mentor and predecessor, Siegfried H. Horn. Geraty graduated from Pacific Union College and received his Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Syro-Palestinian Archaeology from Harvard University. During the past 30 years, he has directed 10 seasons of archaeological excavations in Israel and Jordan, the most recent being in the summer of 1996.

sons why I believe that closing all but these two universities is not a good idea for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its members:

In my opinion, such a plan would not serve the needs of the church better. Brigham Young University (BYU) is often held up as the example for North American Adventists to emulate, but there are reasons why it is not the model to follow. One of the key reasons is that despite the fact that the majority of Mormons live within easy travelling distance of BYU, the percentage of Mormons attending BYU is smaller than the percentage of Adventists attending North American Adventist colleges and universities! We must be doing something right.

Consolidation of Adventist institutions does not necessarily guarantee healthier enrollment. In every case I know of, the consolidation of Adventist academies has meant smaller enrollments. Why? Because, despite the convenience of travel nowadays, it is still true that the majority of Adventist students wish to attend school and even college as close to home as possible. So fewer colleges would probably mean fewer Adventist students within the Adventist system as a whole. And maybe even fewer college-educated Adventists? That could not be good for the church.

Adventists and Mormons: Comparing Enrollments

| | <u>Latter Day Saints</u> | <u>Seventh-day Adventists</u> |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| N. American Membership | 4,613,000 | 843,690 |
| Enrollment | 30,465 ¹ | 19,354 ² |
| Percentage of Membership | 0.66 % | 2.30 % |

¹ Enrollment of Brigham Young University.

² Combined enrollment for institutions of higher education in the North American Division.

Also, the size of an institution does not necessarily correlate with the quality of the education it offers—though research does indicate that maintaining quality at an institution with fewer than a thousand students is very difficult unless its program is very specialized. Of course, the definition of quality is important here. But Frank Knittel's experience offers typical examples. By his own admission, Union College offered him a quality education that prepared him for graduate school. The reason this is so often the case in Adventist colleges is because quality teachers like Frank Knittel are, against the odds, attracted to the mission of Adventist higher education. I well remember the day when, as president of AUC, I looked out at the chapel audience and was surprised to see Frank Knittel. Afterwards, I sought him out and said, "What brings you to AUC?" His response supports my point: "AUC sends La Sierra our best graduate students in English, so I'm here to recruit!"

If only two Adventist universities existed, and they were to admit only the "highest quality" students (such as LLU does, for instance, in medicine and physical therapy), many students who currently go on from Adventist colleges to provide distinguished service to church and society would no longer get educated. Currently, Adventist colleges admittedly take more chances on the under-prepared Adventist student, but the results justify the risk.

If only the two universities advocated were to survive a North American Division higher educational downsizing, imagine how much poorer church life would be without these literally hundreds of vital higher-education employees who are currently so emotionally and intellectually, not to mention financially, invested in the church.

Further, I doubt whether the two universities advocated would provide for the diversity that the Adventist constituency desires or even

accept all the Adventist students who would wish to enroll. (I will expand on this issue below.) Keep in mind that, given the choice, most Adventist families still wish to send their college-aged students through Adventist higher education.

Finally, a very important function of the current colleges and universities in the system is each one's Adventist presence in its respective community. If a dozen of them were to close, imagine the diminished Adventist witness in those communities and in the surrounding institutions and organizations where they now have a positive impact.

Why If Two Colleges Were a Good Idea, It Would Not Work

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America were setting out now to devise the ideal plan for its higher educational system, it might very well come up with a similar plan to what Frank Knittel suggests, and for many of the same reasons. But that is not our situation. We have a history and a current reality that have to be taken into consideration. My contention is that even if having only two colleges seemed to be the ideal, it would not work now for the following reasons:

First, each college and university board is now autonomous and so recognized by NAD action; this was an important governance issue to most accrediting bodies. Most colleges are owned and operated by a union constituency. The truth is that no self-respecting union would want to see its college closed—in this day and age, what other reason is there for the union boundaries? If you don't believe that, look carefully at the length to which the Atlantic, Columbia, and Mid-America unions have been going to subsidize and restructure their college operations so as to allow them to continue to serve their constituencies.

Second, each college currently enjoys a corps of loyal, emotionally invested alumni, who would make it very difficult to close their particular alma mater. (Witness what the well-financed "Friends of La Sierra" did to torpedo consolidation with Loma Linda a few years back.) Furthermore, should consolidation succeed, it is a sure thing that for most alumni their financial support would not translate into support for the successor university nor would union subsidies go from one union to another.

Third, I believe it would be a fallacy to suggest that the larger the university, the more economical is the education it provides. Studies have shown the opposite because the larger universities provide higher salaries, more scholarship aid, more recent and more expensive technology, subsidize research, and expend more money on extracurricular activities that are not integral to a quality education. While state universities charge lower tuition fees because they are tax supported, studies have shown that their operational costs per student are not lower than private schools.

Finally, the administration of Loma Linda University and what was its Riverside campus tried to reorganize and unite on one campus. What seemed the ideal lost out to local politics and control—a tendency that seems to have the inside track in the age in which we live. What evidence do supporters of only two American Adventist universities have that would make that process succeed this time around? What has changed? Everywhere, it seems, the notion of big government is out and local control is in.

My Assessment of the Future for North America's Adventist Colleges and Universities

I believe there is room for as many Adventist colleges and universities in North America as can make it successfully! While having two

universities might be the way to go if the denomination were starting its educational system from scratch, that ignores history. That is not where we are now. As long as the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America is organized as it is, with each union governing its own college or university, it is unlikely that any institution will close unless forced to do so by finances. And if that happens, beware: Finances will not go out of union to finance another institution unless unions merge. I agree with Knittel that each constituency must decide whether it wants a quality institution. If it does, then it needs to support it. If it doesn't, then it needs to close it in an orderly fashion rather than allowing it to die by attrition or starvation. Denominational officials must also then be prepared to deal with the implications of such a loss for their territory, its membership, and their leadership.

What is happening is that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is quietly changing its priorities, just as is society around it. The statistics of support demonstrate that the denomination is no longer as committed to higher education as it once was. When I used to hear church leaders say we must never allow to happen to our colleges what Presbyterians allowed at Princeton, Congregationalists at Harvard, or Baptists at the University of Chicago, I pictured the leaders of these institutions becoming "liberals," with lessened interest in their denominational moorings. But from where I sit now, I realize that it was their denominations gradually abandoning them that produced the changes; loss of denominational support required these institutions to make up for the resources elsewhere.

I can see the same thing happening in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Denominational leaders are gradually, if unwittingly, abandoning their fiduciary responsibility to the colleges on whose boards they sit. I would not suggest that this is conscious or inten-

tional; denominational officials are in a financial squeeze as tithes and offerings lag behind expenses. They have to attend to many traditional programs. Often they allow everything to suffer equally. While that strategy may work for certain areas of the church, it is the death knell for quality education, as Knittel points out. I agree with him that there is an urgent need in the Adventist Church for higher education to be better funded. Every constituency meeting should put this issue higher on its list of priorities. Education in the Adventist Church does not have a tax base. People don't have to give to it. Therefore endowments must be developed. Members need to remember education in their estate planning. Why? Because, as recent studies have shown, growing numbers of Seventh-day Adventists are no longer willing to sacrifice quality for loyalty.

Denominational subsidies used to be a key source of funding for Adventist colleges. Rather than building up endowments as other American institutions were doing, Adventists institutions were led to believe that this "living endowment" would always be there. But times have changed. Resources are being shifted away from subsidies to colleges, for instance, to shore up the retirement fund—certainly another worthy cause. Today, the denominational subsidy to a college, instead of being a major source of support, is fourth, after tuition, government loans to students, and philanthropy. In fact, most Adventist colleges yearly pay out scholarship funds to Adventist constituents in excess of that year's denominational subsidy received!

Consequently, Adventist colleges are scrambling for resources, looking for new sources of income to make up the shortfall from the church. And you can be sure these new sources will have implications for the nature of the colleges. The church, too, understands this, because when it is not able to control higher education through generous subsidies, it sometimes tries control through other means

(witness the "Commitment to God" document voted at the most recent Annual Council, which applies a different standard of accountability to higher education compared to other church entities).

I believe that in spite of the denomination's inability to maintain the kind of financial support its colleges and universities in North America deserve, they will remain Adventist because of the loyalty and commitment of their faculties, administrations, and boards. And I am optimistic about the future of these institutions for the following reasons:

- More colleges, properly financed, will inevitably serve more constituents. While some few students will go anywhere to get their desired education, the majority wish to attend nearer home. So we need colleges located where the students are. The church cannot afford to diminish the total number of Adventist students receiving an Adventist higher education.

- Communism and the U.S. Government have shown that central planning seldom works in practice. Having two universities makes good theory, but constituents who pay the bill have needs that cannot be serviced by distant governments—whether political or denominational (and remember, the two universities suggested by Knittel are General Conference institutions, not even North American, while increasingly the union colleges have boards made up of local people who care about them, know their needs, and are loyal to them).

- The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America is increasingly diverse. Two universities controlled by the General Conference would not be able to serve these diverse needs. Therefore the Adventist institutions in North America are beginning to develop niches for which they are becoming known.

When it comes to programs, for instance, everyone knows that Loma Linda University is a health science institution (as are the junior

colleges operated by Kettering and Florida hospitals, each with its own largely local clientele); Andrews University has the seminary and other unique programs, largely technical in nature, architecture being the most successful example; Walla Walla College has engineering; Griggs University is known the world over for distance learning; and now Union College is imaging itself for its new physician's assistant program.

When it comes to perspectives, for instance, Southern Adventist University subtly promotes itself as ethnically homogeneous and conservative (of course, all Adventist institutions are conservative when compared to options outside the church, though there is a spectrum at the conservative end of the scale and Southern is definitely farthest to the right), while La Sierra University has historically been progressive and now is the most multicultural, and perhaps even the most "urban" of all of the institutions (as befits the southern California society that supports it); Southwestern Adventist University promotes itself as the cheapest to attend, while Oakwood College has the market cornered for African-Americans who desire the "Oakwood experience," as does Canadian Union College for Canadians who want an Adventist education in Canada.

Institutions whose secret of success is their

Drop In North American Division Support—'86-'95

| | 1986 | 1995 |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Operating Income | \$243,335,896 ¹ | \$392,154,654 ¹ |
| Total Subsidies | \$15,107,716 ² | \$16,573,888 ² |
| Percentage of Income | 0.062 % | 0.042 % |

¹ Gross income of all higher educational institutions in the North American Division.

² Combined higher education subsidies from all jurisdictions within the North American Division.

place include Pacific Union College, which takes advantage of its rural setting near the beautiful Napa Valley, Columbia Union College, which makes the most of being situated in the nation's historic capital, and Atlantic Union College, which profits from its location near the Athens of the New World with its history, culture, and natural beauty. These characteristics do not begin to do justice to the special qualities of each institution, but they do illustrate real differences. (In addition, of course, AU, LLU, and LSU are known for their fine graduate and professional schools, which make them unique.) One can readily see that two universities could not possibly serve the increasingly diverse needs of the Adventist constituency nearly so well as these 14 institutions located in North America, properly funded.

- Size of institution will be even less critical for quality in the future than it has been in the past. Cyberspace is making virtually the same resources available to every institution that can afford to be hooked up, no matter its location or size. Andrews and La Sierra universities, particularly, have invested heavily in this new technology, and the West Coast colleges and universities, through a consortium arrangement, are exploring supplementing their academic offerings, through interactive technology, with the best each campus has to offer the others.

- Admissions standards have been a problem on certain campuses, as Knittel correctly points out. And he is also right that many of Adventism's brightest students, knowing of the unevenness in quality, often choose to go to a prestigious non-Adventist institution. The

Adventist system is thus losing students off the "high" end of the scale. But because I am at La Sierra University, I can say what we are doing to address this problem, for instance. The faculty has recently adopted and applied the strictest policies for student admission coupled with faculty promotion and tenure of any Adventist institution anywhere. Furthermore, to get any La Sierra degree, a student will have to take a general-education core program that includes passing written tests in science and math, knowing another language other than his or her mother tongue, and demonstrating annual voluntary community service work.

We are delighted with the quality students and professors being attracted our way. And while I believe this trend is typical of Adventism's other campuses, I grant it is not universal. The system needs not only better marketing, but also better substance; our students definitely deserve to get their money's worth.

- It is well known that the majority of American society's leaders in areas of academe, government, business, and voluntary associations has received its education in small private liberal-arts institutions—institutions like the ones in the Adventist system. Here they get taught by caring teachers and researchers rather than graduate teaching assistants. Not a week goes by but what students volunteer to me what wonderful teachers they have and how interested these teachers are in them, both in and out of class. For obvious reasons, the same cannot be said at larger institutions. Furthermore, our smaller institutions are the ones that offer our students leadership opportunities that they would

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seldom get at more prestigious universities. How else, for instance, can one explain the fact that Pacific Union College ranks in the top tier of liberal-arts colleges in the West or that La Sierra University students have won the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) international championship three times in a row, competing with several hundred other schools of business across the nation and even overseas?

- And all of this quality at a reasonable cost to the student! As expensive as the tuition at Pacific Union College and La Sierra University is, for instance, their charges for room, board, and tuition are lower than the charges at two-thirds of the 66 private, four-year accredited schools in the State of California belonging to the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities (AICCU). It is a truism that resources are more critical at the graduate level than the undergraduate. For that reason I do regret the rush to university status that is now taking place in North American Adventist colleges with Southern Adventist and Southwestern Adventist universities leading the way. While there is

evidence that they were great colleges, the jury is out on whether they will have the resources to compete as great universities.

In summary, I would agree with Frank Knittel that the miracles of the past are no reason for the poor judgment and indecisions of the present. Our constituents deserve better leadership. Our institutional boards must either adequately fund their educational programs or get out of the business. In the meantime, the 14 colleges and universities operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America are a precious resource. They have done a remarkable job with what they have had. I have been closely associated with a third of them and am well acquainted with the rest of them. Like most institutions, all of them have a range of faculties and students, including some of the finest anywhere. In the final analysis, then, it will depend on leadership and board support as to whether all of these institutions will prosper or close in favor of a couple of big universities. I vote for diversity and local autonomy, believing in the end that Adventist mission will be best served that way.