

# Grading the IBMTE Handbook

By Ted Benedict

Our church has been growing rapidly around the globe. The new members are coming out of, and still live in, many cultures that are very different from each other. More to the point, their worldviews and religious backgrounds are often not American. Even within the North American Division, the philosophical/theological premises and conclusions of our religious workers display a competitive and uncomfortable variety. The religious workers who will be ministering to our existing fellowship, and those who are actively seeking new members, are being trained in our more than eighty colleges, seminaries, and universities scattered around the world. Only eighteen of them are located in North America. The potential for variations in basic beliefs is enormous, and to some of our leaders it must be frightening.

In response, a firm decision, embodied in actions of the Annual Councils of 1999 and 2001 (G.C. Working Policies 15 15 and 15 20), has been made to impose comprehensive, worldwide, centralized control over the education and ministry of religious workers. This control is to be effected by creating monitoring bodies at the General Conference (the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education, or IBMTE) and in each of the world divisions (Boards of Ministerial and Theological Education, or BMTEs). The functions of these boards will include authority to approve curricula and courses in each school that lead to degrees in religion or theology through a process of accreditation, approval of the appointment of administrators of those schools (presidents, deans, and chairs), and "ecclesiastical endorsement" of religious workers and teachers. Endorsement will be required when personnel are initially hired, and a re-endorsement will be required at five-year intervals thereafter. Without such endorsements, workers cannot be employed in religious work by the Church, or moved from one division to another.

The details of these requirements, and of the procedures to be used in applying them, are contained in a *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Ministerial and Theological Education*, published in September 2001. Details about these requirements presently run to fifty-seven pages, followed by fifty-five pages of appendices. This document is similar to a conventional set of bylaws. According to the *Handbook*, "It is now ready to be used."

Each board is governed by its own members, who hold office by virtue of their position in the church organization or are nominated by the Annual Council Nominating Committee (IBMTE) or the division nominating committee (BMTE). These members are then "elected" by the first Annual Council or annual division committee meeting after each regular General Conference Session. Each board will meet at least once each year.

The IBMTE has forty-five members, thirty-five of whom are individually ex officio; the rest are selected by the board from persons qualified by their position in church organization. The gender requirement for membership can be met when six of them are women. The quorum for the board is one-third of its membership. The board has an Executive Committee of seventeen members, eleven of whom are ex officio; up to nine others are selected by the board. There is no gender requirement for membership on the Executive Committee. Its quorum is one-third of its membership. A majority vote is required to reach a decision. Given the peripatetic nature of this body, effective control could rest with only four persons, over an agenda that is effectively controlled by the secretary.

The officers of the IBMTE include a chair (the general conference president or his designee), two vice chairs (the GC vice presidents for education and the Ministerial Association), a secretary (the director of the GC Department of Education), and an associate secretary (the secretary of the GC Ministerial Association). The staff of the IBMTE consists of the elected members of the GC Department of Education and of the Ministerial Association. As is usual in church terminology, the secretary and associate secretary are the actual administrators of board business.

The administrative structure of the BMTEs is similar but is less specifically stated, which may give the divisions a little discretion in deciding details. Additionally, the division boards may, with narrowly limited IBMTE approval, follow procedures that are more appropriate to their regional needs.

This critique of the *Handbook* will be limited to some observations of its probable effect on Adventist higher education in North America. There will doubtless be significant consequences for schools elsewhere. Other parts of the world will feature relationships unique to their national locations, laws, politics, and cultures. There will be effects upon the work of pastors, church administrators, chaplains, and others currently engaged in spiritual ministry, but these are outside the scope of this commentary.

Underlying the drafting of the new constraints are several likely assumptions. Those assumptions appear to drive the details of the regulations. They are consistent with a particular style of management, and should not surprise us. We will look at these premises before we comment on their consequences.

Those who drafted these documents and created the relevant boards appear to have made several key decisions:

1. Pastors and others whose jobs involve spiritual ministry are not being properly trained.
2. Mechanisms now in place to ensure the appropriateness and quality of curricula and faculty appointments are not working to suit the purposes of the Church.
3. The campuses themselves cannot assess either the competence or the orthodoxy of the faculty hired for, or assigned to, teach religion courses.
4. Even if the campuses could, they cannot be trusted to use criteria that are acceptable to the world church.
5. Nor can the campuses be trusted to take decisive action on their own assessments.
6. Market forces (job placement of graduates from religion courses) will not operate to develop effective workers (that is, bad graduates will continue to be hired by the conferences and other schools just as frequently as good ones, and the production of unemployable students will not generate feedback to prompt changes in the education of future ones).

If one grants these assumptions, the remedy (another assumption) is to remove judgments about curricula and faculty suitability from the campuses, and to locate these decisions in these newly created boards.

The truth of these assumptions is not certain. There is nothing in the documents that spells out the location, nature, and magnitude of the problems that the new policy addresses. We do not know, for example, whether the problem already exists, or whether it is merely anticipated. We do not know which areas around the world are causing distress, or what the defects are. No data are given. The consequence is that, from my point of view, we seem to have a very specific solution to an unknown problem, a global solution to a local problem,

a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

The policy proposes to solve problems for which the educational system—at least in North America—already has working remedies. It should be noted that our schools are established according to state and other laws through their charters, articles of incorporation, and bylaws. In these documents their ownership is identified, the nature, jurisdiction, and limitations of their governing powers are described, and relationships to other organizations may be spelled out.

For example, each of these schools is already accredited by a regional association that very carefully examines the institution as a whole. Appropriate programs within each are also accredited by specialized professional organizations. These accrediting organizations are very particular about the nature of the institution's governing authority and processes, and it is a matter of great concern to them that the trustees, officers, and faculty actually have the power to make binding decisions that affect all aspects of their programs. We should also note that, although accrediting bodies may offer recommendations for improvement of programs, they very carefully do not step over into actual management. This cannot be said of the proposed boards.

The processes that a campus uses to recruit, appoint, retain, promote, tenure, and terminate faculty are also critically reviewed by the accrediting agencies. These employment processes have evolved over many years—have become standardized—and the principles

developed have acquired the status of law. The proposed procedures would violate those principles and have very serious consequences—financial and otherwise—for the schools.

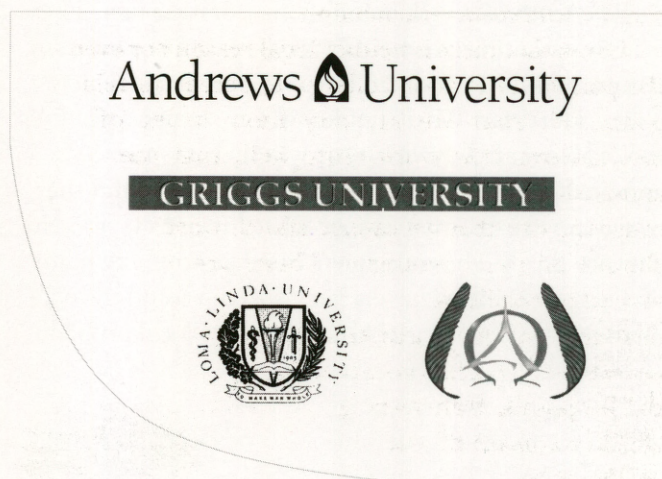
Teachers, especially in tertiary institutions, do their work in a culture that is not well understood or appreciated by persons outside the teaching profession. According to the principle of shared governance, it is generally expected that the faculty will be consulted in matters in which they are uniquely competent and especially concerned. This consultation leads to recommendations to school administrators and governing boards regarding curriculum and personnel matters.

Thus, these proposed policies have ignored the recognized integrity of this professional culture, the existence of legal organizational powers and limitations, the colleges' obligations to accrediting bodies, and the carefully worked out processes of professional judgment and recommendation that inform and support administrative decisions in curriculum and personnel decisions.

These flaws in the proposed policies are very obvious. Among our educators, it is agreed that the consequences of accepting them will be extremely serious. It seems, though, that the drafters either were unaware of the flaws or, although knowing that they are there, they have decided to accept them in order to gain some benefit.

So far as I know, each of our North American schools is

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a unique legal entity, deriving its powers from its own corporate status. Each school is thus independent, governed under its own bylaws by its own trustees, whose fiduciary responsibility is to that institution. Neither the General Conference nor the North American Division, nor even the union within which a school operates, has a legal authority to participate in the administrative affairs of the school, neither in approval of its administrators, the structure of its curricula, nor the employment of its teaching (and other) personnel. From this, it follows that a campus could not, even if it wanted to, yield authority to either of the proposed boards without a major restructuring of its corporate nature. If this is so, the boards are without the power to do the very things that the policies spelled out in

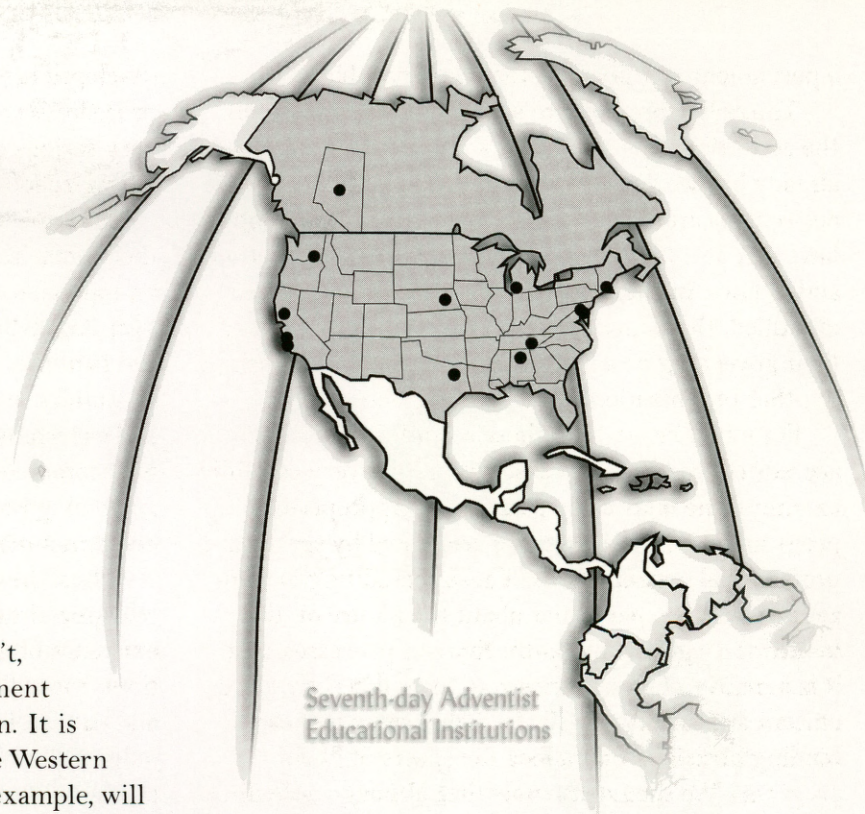
the *Handbook* intend them to do.

Accreditation by regional and professional associations is not realistically optional for our colleges. A loss of accreditation would have massive and destructive consequences; no longer do we entertain the idea of doing our work of education without it. An accrediting review is essentially an exercise in "truth in advertising," a careful examination of the question whether the school presently offers, and can continue to offer, an educational experience that measures up to its public claims. To answer that question, it must be determined that the school has the power to manage its own shop. If it doesn't, then those who do have that management power become the target of investigation. It is completely unreasonable to expect that the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, for example, will extend its approval to the officers of the North American Division, sitting as the governing BMTE, in its accreditation. For example, the accreditation of schools in the WASC area of jurisdiction would immediately be questioned under the proposed arrangement. The same can be said of other American regions.

Not all teachers at our schools are eligible for tenure. Some will fail to qualify because their education is insufficient. Some will fail because they are hired to meet temporary curricular needs. Some will fail because they are not members of our church. But this proposal will remove the possibility of tenure status from all teachers who are employed to give instruction, at least half-time, in religion or theology courses. Those teachers who presently hold tenure would have that status removed. The proposed "certification" of faculty members is not the equivalent of tenure. It does not provide the same protection of academic freedom and accompanying academic due process.

This development would also have immediate consequences for accreditation and expose our schools to very serious financial liability if the faculty members chose to object. This is not the place to make a detailed case for traditional tenure, but it can be said, reassuringly, that tenure does not remove from our institutions the right and power to protect themselves or our church from the evils that the new boards seem designed to eliminate. We already have the protections that we need, and we have an effective system for maintaining them.

Administrators of programs containing religion or



theology courses would have to be approved by the new boards, which would very actively participate in the search process leading to their appointment. These administrators would include department chairs, deans, and even presidents. Again, our accrediting bodies would have the most serious objections to this intrusion into the affairs of the campus.

In summary, it seems plain that the newly created boards intend to solve some problems perceived by some persons in church leadership by exercising massive central control of institutions over which they have no legal jurisdiction, and with very significant damage to our schools. It is unlikely that this proposal is malicious; the more probable explanation is that it is uninformed and springs very naturally from a simplistic bureaucratic mindset.

Given that there is neither legal reason nor even the possibility for our colleges to accede to this proposal, that we already have a set of mechanisms that work quite well, that the expected change would have sweeping negative consequences that we cannot afford, what should be our response? There are several possibilities.

One is that our North American educational institutions accept the proposals, transferring effective control of our campuses to

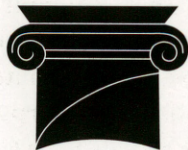


UNION COLLEGE



CANADIAN  
UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE

WALLA  
WALLA  
COLLEGE



SOUTHERN  
ADVENTIST UNIVERSITY

LA SIERRA  
UNIVERSITY



COLUMBIA UNION COLLEGE  
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a central agency, removing tenure from our religion and theology teachers now and from most of the rest of us later, and replacing regional and specialized accreditation with accreditation by the Adventist Accrediting Association.

If we choose to work within the system as best we can, we can appeal to the BMTE to ask the IBMTE to provide unique guidelines for North America (and other divisions as they wish). Feasible guidelines would require a very heavy editing of the *Handbook* before it could be applied. It is, I think, unlikely that this kind of change would be allowed by church leadership unless there are modifications somewhere of our administrative philosophy.

Because there is no legal compulsion requiring us to conform, we could simply ignore the proposal. As a courtesy, we should then notify the BMTE that this is our response. The consequences might be amusing, of course, but one effect would be that the BMTE would have to acknowledge the realities of the situation, and it could then go back to the drawing board, this time with more respectful and, therefore, effective consultation with our several campuses.

In any case, we should encourage the governing boards of our campuses to initiate a review of the proposals, leading to their considered suggestions for an alternative strategy to solve known problems in a way that would be legal and would not compromise institutional independence and integrity or risk loss of existing accreditation. That strategy should be built on our traditions of professional respect and trust as displayed in the principles of collegiality and shared governance. I think this is possible, though it would require reeducating some among our leadership. That course is desirable, and, perhaps, even doable.

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