

ADVENTIST EDUCATION



Time to Act: *Strong Convictions Expressed at a National Summit on Adventist Education* | BY GILBERT M. VALENTINE



La Sierra University in Riverside, California, hosted the National Summit on Adventist Education in October 2010.

To say that there was a palpable sense of alarm among the participants attending the National Summit on Adventist Education, “Crossroads of Peril and Promise,” held at La Sierra University (LSU), in Riverside, California, October 20–23, 2010, would not be to overstate the situation. Although the atmosphere was not one of panic—not yet—there were definite hints of it in the air right from the outset. Fletcher Academy CEO Dr. Dale Twomley’s frank opening keynote address clearly set out the seriousness of the situation, and in a pessimistic, iconoclastic response, Georgia-Cumberland Academy Principal Dr. Gregory Gerard wondered aloud whether there would ever be any real political will to fix things. From the perspective of more than thirty years in Adventist Education, many of them in leadership, Gerard was not hopeful.

So forthright was the tone that LSU School of Education Dean Clinton Valley felt obliged to remind participants that the views being expressed were not necessarily those of the sponsors. It was clear that these meetings would be significant. These first-night speakers were looking not at a looming crisis in Adventist education but at one that had already arrived. The data cited repeatedly during the conference was not necessarily new, but it was stark. During the last two decades more than 400 elementary and secondary schools in North America have closed. Enrollment has dropped more than 40% even as church membership climbed 20%.¹ Competent leaders to head up schools and academies are increasingly scarce. If available they are increasingly unwilling to serve. Leaders for some of the largest academies are being called out of retirement to fill the gaps.

The leadership vacuum is alarming.

The church is changing, and summit participants heard that the changes are having a compound effect on Adventist education. Ethnic diversity is increasing. The Caucasian church membership in North America has become one among the other minorities, and it is steadily graying (50% above age 55 in 2008). The birthrate among Adventists is generally declining. With the average size of younger families in the church steadily shrinking, the catchment pool from which Adventist school enrollments have traditionally been drawn is simply evaporating. While there are new growth areas in church membership in North America, the growth is occurring among people groups that either do not value Christian education in the same way as previous generations or are financially unable to afford it. A demographic study of the North American Division (NAD) undertaken in 2008 by Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson reveals that 40% of Adventists in North America live in households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000. Another 30% live in lower middle class families with incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999. Growing numbers of families clearly would not be able to afford the cost of private school tuition. As the Dean of the School of Education at La Sierra University noted, it appeared to many observers that Adventist education had entered a state of terminal decline. And the experience of other parochial school systems in North America was of no comfort. Urban Catholic schools across the nation have all but disappeared in the last 50 years, and Lutheran and Baptist schools by the hundreds were also turning out the lights and closing their doors.

This blizzard of bleak information provided the background to the sense of deep anxiety pervading the plenary sessions, small group presentations, breakout discussion groups, corridor networking groups and meal table conversations.

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mit, surprising the organizers who had initially hoped for 100. According to the summit convener, Dr. Clinton Valley, participants represented all nine Union Conferences in the NAD and over 100 K-12 Schools and more than 20 SDA and non-SDA higher education institutions. The largest single group attending consisted of eleven professors from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, including their newly appointed Provost, Dr. Andrea Luxton. More than 44 papers were submitted in response to the call for papers. Following a blind professional review by a panel of LSU School of Education academics, 21 were made available electronically for all participants. Six of these were selected for plenary session presentation. Clearly, the level of interest was very high. And not all were pessimistic. Some participants reported that they sensed that perhaps at last there was developing a willingness to openly face the problems confronting the education system and find meaningful solutions. Dr. Valley observed that the summit had drawn so many because a perception had developed that this conference could make a difference. It had become clear that “business as usual” was no longer tenable. Something had to be done.

Good News Provides Impetus for Summit

The idea of a national summit first emerged in mid-2009 with the first startling results from the *CognitiveGenesis* study on Adventist Education. Commencing with the collection of data

in 2006, the LSU-based *CognitiveGenesis* study had undertaken a large scale investigation of the levels of academic achievement in Adventist Schools. Previously for over two decades under the leadership of School of Religion professor, Bailey Gillespie, La Sierra University had been undertaking a longitudinal *Value Genesis* study on how schools and colleges compared with other church agencies in shaping the values and nurturing the faith of Adventist young people. The results of that study had been very informative and helpful to church leaders and had helped shape many changes adopted widely across the denomination. But that study had not looked at academic achievement, and there was developing among the Adventist constituency the idea that Adventist schools were below par, and this was being cited as one of the reasons for the decline in support for the system.

In the face of these developments, Professor Elissa Kido, former Dean of the LSU School of Education, began to wonder how effective Adventist schools really were in promoting the academic success of their students. Could the academic progress of students in Adventist schools be documented and compared to those in other systems? Over a four-year period Professor Kido headed up a study in partnership between LSU and the NAD in which every school and every student in North American Adventist schools would be assessed.² The research project, funded predominantly by private donors, had demon-



strated by 2010 that students in Adventist schools, were in fact, on average, outperforming their peers in other school systems, private and government, by at least half a grade per year.³ This was true across all disciplines. Adventist education, if only Adventist parents realized it, was in fact a very good bargain. If the church's educational system was in terminal decline, it was not because schools were failing to provide excellent academic results. The church, its parents, and its educators needed to hear this, and the church needed to grapple with the real problems that were facing the system, thought Kido and Valley. The idea for a conference was born.

A steering committee was formed compris-



ing Elissa Kido, Director of the *CognitiveGenesis* project at LSU, Clinton Valley, then a professor of Administration and Leadership at LSU, Kelly Bock, Pacific Union Conference Education Director, Don Dudley, Superintendent for Schools for the Southeastern California Conference (SECC) and Marilyn Thomsen, LSU Vice President for Advancement. Professors Kido and Valley found ready support from other educational leaders who shared their concern for the school system and who viewed the situation as serious enough to join forces. The SECC Education Department made an early commitment of support with Director Don Dudley pledging that his staff and school leaders would attend. Kelly Bock of the Pacific Union Conference committed his department to help underwrite the expens-

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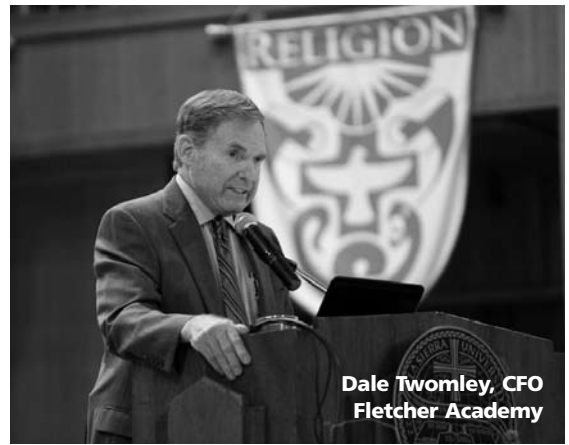
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es of the meeting as did the NAD Vice-President for Education, Larry Blackmer. "We need new eyes," observed Blackmer, and the system needed "to listen" to make sure that as educational decisions are made they are made "for the right reasons and in quality ways."⁴ The conference had genuinely taken on the dimensions of a national summit.

As an added indication of the seriousness of the situation, newly-elected General Conference Education Director Dr. Lisa Beardsley also attended for the entire duration of the meetings, playing a significant supportive role, a fact that did not pass by unnoticed by summit participants. Would there now finally be a commitment to not allow the situation to drift further? The new North American Division President Elder Dan Jackson attended on Thursday morning to welcome and greet participants and to express support for their endeavor. He also encouraged participants and reinforced the perception that at last this summit might be a "game-changer." Elder Jackson recounted the deep impact that Adventist teachers had made on his life through their caring attitudes. "The need for Seventh-day Adventist Education in the North American Division has never been greater," he affirmed and indicated that the Division was committed to "reaching out" to its "institutions of higher learning." There was a need, he said, "to find the very best way possible to cooperate with each other." LSU observers noted that this was the first time an NAD President had set foot on La Sierra Campus in many years, and they took courage from this indication of the church's positive and affirmative commitment to higher education.

No Shortage of Ideas, Opinions and Hopes

The summit steering committee had wisely invited speakers representing a wide range of perspectives. They wanted to ensure that the problems of the education system were addressed from every possible angle. Larry



Blackmer acknowledged that there were "many, many people" who thought they could "run Adventist education better than Adventist education," but he hoped that "the variety of voices around the table at La Sierra" would help to uncover "manageable, intelligent, wise ways" to address the issues the system was facing. The plethora of diagnoses and remedies, often conflicting with one another, certainly gave participants much to think about. Dale Twomley asserted in his keynote address that a lack of adequate leadership was a key issue. Twomley, who has developed a well-deserved reputation as a specialist in rescuing endangered academies from extinction and turning them around and seeing them flourish, spoke of the systemic problems that put the system at risk of demise. Lack of leadership is a key issue, he said, largely because the system lacks an adequate remuneration system that encourages capable leaders to commit to the rigors and challenges of educational leadership. Twomley warned that unless there was a change in the remuneration system to reflect community rates there would be no correction of the downward trend. The leadership vacuum and the lack of an adequate remuneration scheme were reinforced by numerous speakers during the summit. The call to consider a reorganization of the system similar to that which was undertaken for the Adventist Health System was suggested. At the very least was there a need to develop a separate wage scale for educators?

Shane Anderson, pastor and author of the

widely read 2009 book *How to Kill Adventist Education and How to Give it a Fighting Chance*, resonated well with the participants, and he also identified the lack of strong leadership as a critical issue. He argued that the declining system could be turned around if educators would only recover a passion for the “unique mission and message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church...that we believe that Jesus is coming sooner rather than later.” For Anderson, the renewal of Adventism’s apocalyptic message is critical, for without it the church would lose its “reason for being.” Both teachers and staff needed to be “strongly Adventist personally,” and educators needed to link up anew with pastors because “they are the gatekeepers of Adventist education.” This “reformation solution” to the system’s ills was a distinctive strand of thought at the conference.

Other speakers, while affirming the view that spiritual vitality must ever lie at the heart of the system, did not agree that “reformation” would of itself fix the problems. Monte Sahlin’s video-recorded response to Shane Anderson pointed out the inevitability of the demographic shift taking place in the church. The church is ageing, families are smaller, the catchment pool of Adventist children is shrinking. This is happening in spite of spiritual vitality and renewal and needed to be factored into any solution. Steve Pawluk, Provost at LSU, applauded Anderson’s emphasis on the role of pastors as “gatekeepers” in the sense that their support of schools is critical. But he then noted the crucial distinction that schools are not the church *per se*. The church with its youth camps, Sabbath schools and youth meetings is a much cheaper way of achieving the goals of basic religious education and securing commitment to the church. Adventist schools are schools, not churches, and their focus on quality learning and teaching is critical to their success in preparing young people for professional service to the church and its community.

Another presentation received enthusiastically by participants was that by Pacific Union

Conference Associate Education Director Thomas Thambi who proposed a financial fix for the system. Frustrated principals burdened by their continual struggle with school finances liked the idea of a universal, additional 2–5% “tithe” contribution being asked of churches as part of an augmented tithing system (in essence making it a tithe and a half). Union conferences would retain an additional 5% of the tithe they would normally send on to the General Conference and would use this to fund schools. This would be the basis for a free admission policy for all Adventist parents in North America. Non-Adventist parents would pay community rates, and schools would send these community tuition amounts back to the Union. The proposal supported the broadened use of tithe on the basis that teachers functioned as “licensed ministers.” This “Five Per Cent Solution” he felt would certainly get the financial monkey off the



Elissa Kido, La Sierra University
Professor of Education

backs of principals. Pacific Union College Vice President for Finance, Dave Lawrence, also dealt with the financial dilemmas of the system. He reported on his study of school finance in the NAD which revealed, counter-intuitively, that on average Adventist schools achieved high rates of academic achievement quite independently of the varying levels of per capita expense. Less resourced schools did as well as more adequately resourced schools. This did not of course mean that schools still did not need money.

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ment money was also advocated as an appropriate source of revenue that needed to be expanded. Dr. Edwin Hernandez, a Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame, reported on some situations where state-funded “education vouchers” had been made available for students in private education. He encouraged a more aggressive approach from schools seeking these funds which functioned in similar ways to Pell grants for higher-education students and could be obtained without compromising strings attached. Dr. Hernandez urged a more mission-oriented focus for Adventist schools, particularly for students from a low socio-economic base. Such an approach would help address the needs of the growing Hispanic groups in the church. David Williams, Professor of Public Health at Harvard School of Public Health, and an alumnus of Caribbean Union College, Andrews University, and Loma Linda University, also spoke of the challenges of the changing demographics in the church and the need to be ready to help low-income families. The changing demographics should be seen as an opportunity and not a threat, he said. Appropriate government grants could help Adventist education to seize this opportunity. Is the rethinking of attitudes to appropriate forms of government funding part of the way forward for Adventist education?

If Adventist school finance was not an easy problem to solve, neither was governance of the Adventist school system. This was the issue for a number of speakers. Dr. Robert Summerour, co-chair of an organization known as the Alumni Awards Foundation (AAF), observed in his plenary session presentation that a major problem of the system was that it was hardly a system at all. When one goes looking for whoever is in charge of the system, no one can be found, he observed. No one person is in charge. This makes achieving any kind of change exceptionally difficult if not actually impossible. It was not like changing direction in a huge ship which might be

expected to be a slow process. Rather, the Adventist education system in North America was like a scattering of hundreds of independent yachts on an ocean, each sailing under its own mast each doing its own thing. Such fragmented governance arrangements, with parochial interests dominating over all else, is a systemic flaw, he maintained. Was it not time for NAD to become much more involved with ownership and control? Why could not higher education institutions integrate in some kind of multi-campus arrangement for much greater efficiency and long-term sustainability? The point was echoed in a candid moment during the college and university presidents’ break-out session when the moderator asked if the present arrangement for the provision of Adventist Higher Education in North America was sustainable. Not one of the five senior administrators participating was able to answer in the affirmative. In the light of the systemic hurdles, however, it appeared to the pessimistically-inclined participants that bankruptcies and withdrawn accreditation would force campus closures rather than a proactive system of mergers.

In the face of these intractable systemic problems, a solution for the K–12 system proposed by AAF, although “outside the box,” resonated with a number of principals. AAF is a non-profit organization that has sought to empower Adventist schools to reach their full potential through a series of incentive grants and awards. Summerour’s organization now



**Victor Brown,
Kettering College
of Medical
Arts Dean for
Enrollment
Management**



**Lisa Beardsley,
General Conference
Education Director**

proposes a separately funded and operated network of schools commencing in 2013. The aim of the new network is to “create a new model to grow into,” Summerour explained to a crowded lunchtime audience. Beginning with a selection of five, AAF plans soon to publish the criteria for schools to be accepted into the network. Schools will not be required to sever relationships to conferences. Although there will be new accountability requirements, the organization is not envisaging school closures. The organization is committed to securing financial capital and using it wisely, he explained.

Before the summit, some school principals had expressed the view that they hoped the conference would not come up with the simplistic view that all that was needed to fix the system was better marketing. But while discussions of marketing did feature in the program, it seemed clear that better marketing by itself could not be a fix. A number of presenters highlighted the particular marketing challenges facing North American schools. In break-out sessions recruiters reported on the increasingly difficult challenge of marketing to Adventist families. Victor Brown, Dean for Enrollment Management at Kettering College in Ohio, identified a number of key difficulties beyond the demographic issues. Competition among schools, a tuition-driven system and an increasingly polarized church membership made traditional marketing approaches both more difficult and less effective. It was a clear consensus that while marketing would contin-

ue to be important, by itself, it would not turn the system around. Social networking would prove to be of more value than any sophisticated software or technological approach, argued the Dean of La Sierra’s School of Business, Dr. Johnny Thomas. “Every relationship matters,” when you are talking about marketing, he pointed out. But it was important to establish a “purple cow” kind of niche and market that point of uniqueness.

Just what it is that constitutes the distinctiveness of Adventist schools was a much discussed issue at the summit. Numerous voices in plenary sessions and in smaller discussion groups sought to clarify what should be the central purpose of Adventist Education. Some voices asserted the primary *raison d’être* is to indoctrinate students in Adventist doctrines and lifestyle. Other voices claimed that the primary purpose is to give students an opportunity to develop a personal relationship with Christ and make a personal Christian commitment. Any Christian school could do that, responded the Adventist indoctrination advocates. Yet others asserted the primary purpose was to provide quality education but within a distinctively Adventist world view. The claims for primacy were overlapping, competitive and ultimately unresolved. How much the competition for primacy was simply semantics was not clear either. The undercurrent of competing claims for primacy of purpose illustrated a perplexity that school administrations of whatever stripe have to face—the perplexity of the “pile of purposes” that society and constituencies heaped on to their educational institutions.

There is no one simple and crystal clear objective such as that which drives a business where ultimately, profit is the bottom line. Adventist educators wrestle still with their own “pile of purposes.” John Webster, Dean of the School of Religion at La Sierra University, proposed that the biblical concept of “Advent” could provide the organizing theological principle for Adventist education. Grounded in the “Advent” of God in the past, the theme not

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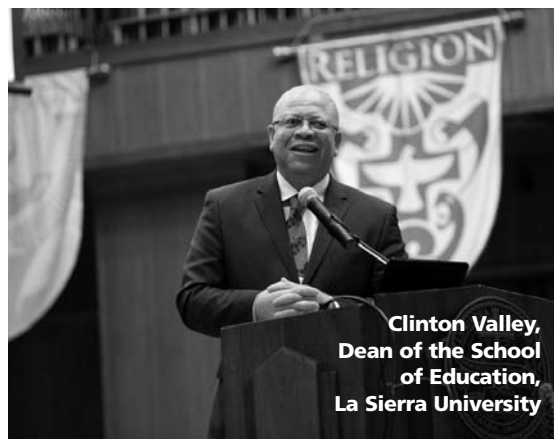
only points educators and students forward to the “world to come” but introduces them now to “the joy of service” in the presence of Jesus in the present. Adventist-centrism and Christ-centrism in this way are one and the same.

Participants heard reports of K–12 schools that were endeavoring to refocus their purpose to enable them to address the changing demographic challenges. These schools were becoming more evangelistically focused and intentionally reaching out to their non-Adventist communities. A number of schools were thriving under this focused, outward-looking model. Dr. Don Williams presented the rationale for such a model particularly for Adventist colleges and universities in his paper entitled “The Centered Set.” The paper cited a number of examples of this kind of institution from the history of Adventist education. A “bounded set” institution in contrast to a “centered set” institution followed a more familiar pattern which involved the following: a) the listing of essential characteristics of those within the set, b) ensuring that those within the set shared common characteristics, and c) identifying who is either inside or outside their boundaries.

By contrast, “centered set” Adventist institutions would place Jesus at the center, and the process of discipleship adopted the goal of moving people toward the center. The adoption of the “centered set” model for an educational institution would require an “institution to be very purposeful in its mission,” he



Richard Osborn, Vice President, Western Association of Schools and Colleges



Clinton Valley, Dean of the School of Education, La Sierra University

explained. Furthermore, moving to a “centered set” orientation should not be driven by economics. Creeping compromise would accompany such a move. While in the case of the centered set approach a conscious choice is made to enroll a more diverse population, the institution must have a more intentional mission and a more clearly chosen theological position. Williams illustrated the differences between the two approaches with an agricultural metaphor used by Frost and Hirsch in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come* (2003). In Australia, water wells rather than fences are used to control herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. Providing a source of water keeps the livestock centered geographically. In contrast, livestock in America are largely controlled by fences.

Beyond the Campfire

The sense of urgency that pervaded the entire four days of the summit did not dissipate as delegates prepared to leave. Rather, at the last plenary session on Friday afternoon, October 22, a formal action was taken to move beyond the talk. Stephan Gray, Vice-principal of North Dallas Academy, had expressed the sentiment of many in his hope for measurable change and no more “sitting around the campfire.” Frequently participants had voiced the concern that business could not continue as usual. Something had to change. In a final vote, the summit participants expressed their convictions and endorsed a resolution that captured the mood and concern and urged the church to action.

Their action read:

Whereas

- this national summit of almost 300 educational and church leaders has received reports and considered research data that clearly establish that the Adventist K–12 education system in North America is in serious decline, and
- it is clear that both the K–12 and the higher education systems are confronted with major challenges arising from changing demographic and economic environments as well as financial and systemic factors, and
- it is the conviction of the summit participants that the Adventist Education system in North America faces grave threats to its sustainability; therefore,

RESOLVED

To request the North American Division Office of Education to establish a Commission on Education in North America (CENA) to study and make strategic recommendations to the relevant authorities that will ensure the future viability of both K–12 and higher education in the North American Division. The Commission should be subdivided into subcommittees co-opting expertise and resources as appropriate to accomplish its mission for K–12 and higher education.

The Commission's terms of reference should include but are not limited to the following issues:

1. *Identity and Mission*
2. *Structure and Governance*
3. *Marketing*
4. *Funding*
5. *Constituency Involvement*
6. *Leadership Development*
7. *Pastoral Partnership*

The resolution was forwarded to the North American Division Office of Education by the Summit conveners Professors Kiddo and Valley the following week. The resolution is now in the hands of the North American Division. Whether the turn taken at these crossroads leads to peril or promise remains to be seen. ■

An Update:

In November, the North American Division Office of Education determined to deal with the "Resolution" by proposing that each of the nine Unions in the NAD establish a taskforce to review and make resolutions on one of the seven areas of concern. This approach was endorsed by the Association of Colleges and Deans of Education (ACDE) at its meeting in Tampa, Florida in December and then enthusiastically approved by the North American Education Advisory. Taskforce preliminary reports are due in May 2011.



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References

1. In the Pacific Union Conference territory alone during the past decade K–12 enrollment had declined almost 21.8%. Varying rates of decline have been cited depending on the span of time considered, the sector and the geographic region. Long-term steady decline everywhere is the general pattern.

2. Robert J. Cruise of La Sierra University and Jerome Thayer of Andrews University provided statistical expertise for the study.

3. The comprehensiveness of the study and the significance of the results have attracted attention from research organizations and publishers. See <http://www.cognitivegenesis.org/article.php?id=2>

4. LSU Executive Director of University Relations Larry Becker provided regular detailed advance news releases as well as reporting by journalist Darla Tucker for the summit. These reports published on the LSU website have provided valuable resources for this report. These include "First national SDA education summit to brainstorm change" (Darla Tucker) August 4, 2010; "National ed summit produces plethora of opinions, ideas, hopes"

New York's Best-Kept Secret

Winter Highlights:

Feb 12

Rebekah Wang—*Polarization in the Adventist Church / What makes a Hospital Adventist*

Feb 19

Rev Eliezer Reves—*Immigration and Religion: An Ethic of Reciprocal Solidarity in the Works of Jane Addams*

March 5

Gina Rae Foster—*Lyric Dwelling: The Art and Ethics of Invitation and Occupation*

March 12

Brian Straver—*Triumphs & Tragedies of Louis Conradi / When Loughborough Got it Wrong*

March 19

Ron Lawson—*Review of Finding My Way in Christianity*

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Worship with us Sabbath mornings at 11:00 at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 521 W. 126 St., Manhattan

(two short blocks from the 125 St. Subway station on the #1 line).

Upcoming Events at San Diego!

March 5 **The Role of Faith-based Colleges in the World of Higher Education** — Drs. Richard Osborn and Richard Winn, Vice Presidents, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

May 20–22 **Thirteenth Annual SDAF Retreat at Pine Springs Ranch near Idyllwild, Calif.** — Dr. John R. Jones, LSU School of Religion

Recent Happenings:

January 8, 2011 **Genesis 1: What in the World did that First Hebrew Audience Hear?** — Brian S. Bull, MD, LLI School of Medicine, and Fritz Guy, PhD, LSU School of Religion

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Also, watch for our new website in 2011
(check above link and/or spectrummagazine.org)

(Darla Tucker), October 22, 2010.

5. <http://www.alumniawards.com>

6. Frost, Michael and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come*.

(Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 47.

Gil Valentine (pictured, previous page), is Chair of the Department of Administration and Leadership in the School of Education at La Sierra University. He has served as a senior administrator in Adventist Higher Education institutions in Pakistan, Thailand and Australia. Prior to his appointment at La Sierra he served in the South Pacific Division Education Department as Tertiary Education Officer.

FEEDBACK ■ Continued from page 9

the usual chronological questions. We wanted to direct attention to the theological significance of the text; this significance, we are convinced, was its message. Thus we would encourage twenty-first-century readers to avoid the common but unwarranted assumption that ancient Biblical texts directly address modern scientific concerns.

Incidentally, Dr. McMahon is not the first conservative Creationist to cite the late eminent Hebraist James Barr in favor of a literal interpretation of the Creation days in Genesis 1. Barr is very clear:

Interpretations which suppose that the seven "days" of creation are not actual days but long ages, days of revelation, or the like... are all transparent devices for making the Bible appear to be factually accurate by altering its meaning at the awkward points. In other words, schemes... which are reputed to preserve the authority of the Bible and the accuracy of its narratives seldom succeed in doing so: they paper over one crack while causing another and yet larger one to appear elsewhere.

Barr then continues with a listing of what he considers to be factual errors in Genesis. His point was that a reader who takes the Genesis author's 24-hour days as factually correct must also take the vast ocean above the sky as factually correct. We believe that those who cite Barr's authority at the one point where he agrees with them are, in the interest of intellectual honesty, obligated to state that his overall view of Genesis is radically different from theirs.

BRIAN BULL

FRITZ GUY