

**S**eventh-day Adventist colleges in North America are facing unusual challenges and opportunities.

First the challenges. The SDA college can no longer count on all young SDA college-bound persons attending; they have to be recruited. To be viable, the SDA college must offer first-rate education in what have become expensive professional programs and provide a home away from home that is conducive to personal and spiritual growth. Despite small endowments, shrinking student aid, and level church support, the college must attract a stable and competent faculty and keep abreast of new and costly developments in higher education. It must meet the varied interests, needs, and choices of

# The Christian College Teacher

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today's young Adventists while remaining loyal to the faith and life of our church.

And now for the opportunities. The SDA college can provide exceptional educational opportunities because of its wholistic philosophy of education. It can also contribute enormously important values to students, their future families, society, and indeed the nation—values needed by our society to a far greater degree than it realizes. The SDA college can support the many young persons who want to believe in God, but who do not know how to do so because they feel troubled about their relationships with family and friends, ambivalent about their church, and gripped by

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contemporary culture. The SDA college can help shape the future leadership and direction of our church and its mission by the way it prepares its graduates for a life of faith and service.

Only a joint effort by trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff can adequately meet the challenges and grasp the opportunities, but the main burden falls upon the faculty. The trustees will focus upon the institution's mission and seek support for it. The administration will envision and plan the facilities, activities, and future direction of the college. The staff will meet the ever-growing needs of technical and personal support for college activities. But the faculty forms the pivot around which all these things turn, because they bring to education the most crucial ingredient of all, namely the meeting of two inquiring minds—teacher and student.

### **The Teacher as Instructor**

The meeting of minds between student and teacher implies that the teacher, not the subject, plays the crucial role in Christian education. Much has been made of the curriculum design and the textbooks used in the Christian college—in other words, of *what* we teach. While we must never minimize the importance of such tools, they are of no avail without good teachers.

We have also explored the possibilities of unique Christian approaches to mathematics, science, history, psychology, literature, and other subjects, and while that is important, the role of the Christian teacher remains essential.

According to Arthur J. De Jong, Christian college teaching *"takes place in the classroom some of the time and outside the classroom some of the time. It takes place as people interact with people, when students listen to lectures and observe faculty members*

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*function in their profession, when students argue with faculty members, and when they are counseled by faculty members."*<sup>1</sup>

Ellen White suggests that only as teachers do the work of true education in their daily association with students can they have a permanent influence over them for good.<sup>2</sup>

The teacher, then, holds the key to successful Christian education. No amount of materials, equipment, tools, or resources can take the teacher's place. The quality of the Adventist college will be no better or worse than the quality of its teachers.

### **The Teacher as a Person**

The meeting of minds in teaching implies that education always comes to the student wrapped in the personality and shaped by the attitudes of the teacher. Ellen White refers to this aspect of teaching when she distinguishes between technical knowledge, clever skills, and artistic expression on the one hand, and truth and wisdom on the other.<sup>3</sup> De Jong puts it this way:

*Faculty members at a church-related college ought not to hide behind their specialties; they cannot fulfill their obligation to students by simply imparting information and developing skills, but rather by interacting as total persons with the total person of the student.*<sup>4</sup>

As they teach this way, Christian college professors expose themselves to their students. If students discover that the Seventh-day Adventist teacher is personally out of step with the substance of what is being taught and with the life and faith of the college, they will feel betrayed and confused. But if they note harmony between the teacher and the essence of what is being taught they will feel—challenged perhaps, but always secure; stretched at times, but never broken; confronted, but not put off. And

they will emerge from the learning experience stronger, more integrated and balanced people.

Thus there is no opportunity for effective Christian teachers ever to retreat from their subjects. They cannot teach in a disinterested way, as though it matters little what is being studied and learned. Their textbooks may be good or bad, the laboratories well or poorly equipped, the curriculum brilliant or just ordinary, but the personal qualities of the Christian teacher remain essential to the task of teaching, because it is those qualities in which the subject matter is wrapped when it is presented to the student.

### The Teacher as Believer

The meeting of the minds in Christian teaching implies that what is being taught comes with values already attached—not primarily some inherent value of the subject, but rather the particular values of the teacher. Thus Christian education does not offer a special Christian math, or a religious science, or a spiritual history. Rather, the values of which we are speaking, the values that matter, are those of the teacher. They are religious and spiritual values, and they point the Christian teacher in two directions: toward the subject matter and toward the student.

The first of these directions is particularly difficult to describe, for what special Christian values could possibly be attached to seemingly secular subjects such as science, literature, history, sociology, mathematics, or geography? However, careful reflection reveals several values associated with teaching even these subjects in a Christian college. First, truthful representation of all subjects taught is essential. Any attempt to shield students from the truth, no matter how troubling the topic may appear, will only return to haunt the teacher. Second, respect for the subjects taught, and for those taught by colleagues, reinforces the importance of education. Third, a ready willingness to relate each subject to God and to the teacher's Christian experience helps students integrate their faith and learning. Only the faculty's own personal integration of faith and learning—and not some integration of the two enforced by the

textbook or syllabus—will nurture the student's faith.

The second set of values simply requires that Christian college teachers regard their students as younger brothers and sisters in the faith, whose keepers they are called upon to be, both inside and outside of the lecture room. We have observed especially in recent years, with deep regret, how many students, even strapping college men, shudder at the thought of a divorce at home. With whom shall they talk, Mom or Dad? Where do they go for vacation? How do they date confidently?

This same sense of being adrift, feeling abandoned and insecure can grip students whose teachers have brought them into a difficult and challenging field of study and left them without a keeper. A Christian teacher who evokes questions regarding faith in the student's mind (and such questions will arise from time to time in college teaching) is duty bound to help that student resolve these questions and reach greater spiritual maturity in the process. For what does it help to gain the whole world (of knowledge) if one loses one's soul? This second direction, toward which the values of Christian education point, centers on the student as a person—a child of God. And that explains how the work of education and the work of redemption are identical.<sup>5</sup>

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Education directors, college presidents, and board chairmen can do many things of value for Christian education, but they cannot do the most important thing—teach students. Only teachers can. By the same token, members of the faculty may look to the college administration, the board, or the church to support them with equipment, facilities, and moral support, and that too is needed, but it is no substitute for the meeting of two minds in teaching and learning.

The way these two minds meet and the outcome of that meeting represents the most important aspect of Christian education and the most valuable contribution it can make to the world of education and the life of the church. It turns the work of teaching from a profession into a calling, and it turns education from human service into a ministry. ✍

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#### REFERENCES

1. Arthur J. De Jong, *Redeeming a Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1990), p. 135.
2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), p. 277.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 30.
4. De Jong, p. 136.
5. White, p. 16.