

A Look at the Board of One Adventist University

What are the responsibilities of a Seventh-day Adventist college or university board of trustees? How do they do their work? Each Seventh-day Adventist university/college board of trustees is similar in some respects and different in others.

Similarities

The board of La Sierra University (LSU) in Riverside, California, is similar to those of other Adventist institutions of higher education that are sponsored by union conferences. The union president is our board chair, the members are broadly representative of the conferences in our “territory,” and we try to get trustees who contribute at least two of the following w’s (and hopefully all three): *wisdom, work, and wealth*.

Much of the actual work of the board is done in subcommittees for which the university vice-presidents serve as secretary. These subcommittees include the:

- *Academic Programs and Personnel Committee* (processes all new or modified academic programs, all personnel items, and anything that deals with academics at the university);
- *Finance, Budget, and Audit Committee* (deals with university finances);
- *Development and Membership Committee* (processes all fund-raising initiatives and looks after membership issues relating to the board itself);
- *Student Life Committee* (watches over the co-curricular aspects of the university's programs such as residence hall issues, the student association, clubs, student services, the spiritual life of the campus, etc.); and
- *Recruitment and Retention Committee* (which looks for ways to attract and retain students).

By Lawrence T. Geraty

Other committees, such as the Investment Committee, the Land Development Committee, and the Buildings and Grounds Committee, include trustees in their membership, though they are not strictly trustee committees.

Differences

La Sierra University's board is also different in some respects from other Adventist college and university boards:

Each college/university must carefully think through who will hold the unique responsibility of trusteeship and how it will be exercised.

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1. Our constituency meets every other year on our campus (in alternating years, the constituency meets at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, the other higher education institution sponsored by our union conference). This has the advantage of bringing the union executive committee members plus certain alumni onto campus, where they can concentrate on university business uninterrupted by the politics of a union conference session, and where they can see and “feel” the institution’s progress for themselves.

2. Our bylaws require all 23 trustees to be Christians and 22 of them to be Seventh-day Adventists.

Our first trustee not of our faith was Art Pick, president of the Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce. He served the school extremely well because he saw himself as an ambassador for LSU. At least three times a day in his meetings downtown, he mentioned LSU in a favorable light! Having wandered away from his earlier faith, he became very close to his Adventist colleagues on the board. He asked me to preside at his marriage, and his funeral was held at the LSU church, attended by several hundred friends and business associ-

ates, many of whom had never set foot in an Adventist church before.

After his death, some expressed concern about selecting another trustee not of our faith, lest it give the wrong signal to our constituency or possibly undermine the “Adventistness” of the institution. Nevertheless, the city’s “Citizen of the Year,” long-time businessman and philanthropist Henry Coil, has just been elected to our board.

LSU has recently named a 65-member Foundation Board whose directors represent our very supportive community. They include people such as the county manager, the Riverside mayor, the publisher of our local newspaper, a local judge, a recently retired county supervisor, a former state assemblyman, the president of the Chambers of Commerce,

and several leading business people.

Only a third of this group are Adventists. The Foundation Board serves in an advisory capacity, but its directors are increasingly involved in the university and are beginning to provide significant financial support as well. It is the chairman of this group who has just become our 23rd trustee.

Of the 22 trustees who must be Adventists, only nine are required to be denominationally employed by virtue of their office (five are union officers, three are conference presidents, and one is the university president). All the others are elected to staggered six-year terms. While they must be Adventists—and many are alumni—the majority of them cannot be employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This gives the trustees a certain independence from being unduly influenced by denominational leadership or swayed by loyalty to other church institutions. In practice, of course, all trustees work together for the good of the university and to enhance its Adventist identity and mission.

3. Whenever the board meets, “Open Forum” time is set aside when anyone can address the board for up



La Sierra University (LSU) President Lawrence T. Geraty (left) and board chair Thomas Mostert at the March 18, 2004, LSU board of trustees meeting. Behind them in the board room are a few of the many biblical artifacts from the university’s collection. Dr. Geraty is holding up a CD given to the trustees by Elsie Chan, a retiring board member.



Officers of the university student association share students' concerns with the LSU trustees.

to three minutes on a topic of his or her choice. We have had students, faculty, and alumni take advantage of this opportunity. This plan undercuts the notion that the board is somehow shielded from the "truth" about campus issues.

4. Frequency of meetings is always an issue. Our bylaws call for the board to meet at least three times per year; with one meeting each academic quarter, plus an annual board retreat early in the school year. We have no executive committee, since all trustees wish to be involved in decision-making. While the chair of the board is always the union conference president, the vice chair is a layperson. They take turns chairing meetings of the trustees.

5. The board attempts to in-service itself on boardsmanship and professional development by devoting some time at each meeting to these issues. Often, a consultant is invited to speak on a specific issue confronting the board. Each year, the board holds a weekend retreat at which such issues are presented and discussed, often with the assistance of the Association of Governing Boards, an organization that produces useful



University President Lawrence T. Geraty thanks Elsie Chan for her service on the LSU board of trustees during the final meeting of her six-year term of membership.

booklets and videos for this purpose.

6. The work of the trustees is guided by the *LSU Trustee Handbook*, authored largely by trustee Jerry Wiley who, until his untimely death, was vice dean of the law school at the University of Southern California. A very useful document, it may be found

on the university's web site: <http://www.lasierra.edu/trusteehandbook>. This handbook contains 10 chapters, each dealing with a different responsibility of a trustee:

I. How the Board of Trustees Functions (Governance, Policy, Administration, Reservation of Control,

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Delegation, Limitations, Interim Decisions, Board Committees);

II. Trustee Responsibility for Evaluation;

III. Trustee Responsibility for Development (General, Responsible Groups, Trustee Activities);

IV. Trustee Responsibility for Research Endeavors (Obligations, Directions, Control, Duty);

V. Trustee Responsibility for Financial Integrity (Authorization, Budget Preparation and Financial Administration, Investments, Information, Evaluation);

VI. Trustee Legal Rights and Re-



Richard Osborn, president of the Pacific Union's sister college, Pacific Union College (PUC), updates the La Sierra University board of trustees on cooperative efforts between the two institutions.



Jim Wilson, LSU professor of biology and chair of the university's faculty senate, addresses the board of trustees.

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sponsibilities (Basis, Rights and Responsibilities, Legal Standard of Duty, Indemnification, Limitations);

VII. Trustee Moral Responsibility (Support, Dissent, Confidentiality);

VIII. Trustee Relationships (The President, the Faculties and Academic Freedom, Communications With Faculty, the Constituency, the Church and the Community);

IX. Trustees' Additional Responsibilities (General, Demanding Nature, Remoteness and Dissimilarities, Special Effort, Trusteeship Not Administration, During Session, Attendance, Between Sessions); and

X. The Trustee Chairman's Relationship and Responsibilities (Interpreter, Spokesperson, Shared Effort, Counsel).

The handbook also contains a series of appendices such as: Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws, Mission Statement, Organizational Charts, Faculty Senate Constitution, Committees, Trustee List, Trustee Biographies, Conflict of Interest Statement, and Campus Address/Phone List, etc.

This document has helped our trustees to work together effectively as a group for the benefit and support of the institution and its mission.

Much of the ultimate success or failure of an institution of higher education lies with its board of trustees. This means that each college/university must carefully think through who will hold the unique responsibility of trusteeship and how it will be exercised. A quotation from Richard T. Ingram sums it up well: "The effectiveness of a board greatly depends on the structure of its organization and the conduct of its meetings. A pro-



Ted Benedict shares his perspectives on the university's future during the final meeting of his term on the LSU board of trustees.

ductive board is usually one that has periodically taken that time to thoughtfully sort out its duties, critically review its organizational structure and rules of procedure, and update its bylaws, policy or operations documents.

"Committee structure depends upon the board's size, the frequency of meetings, and the workload that can be placed on individual members. Periodic critical review should also determine, among other things, if a few persons in fact are making most of the board's decisions, if responsible minority opinions have the opportunity for full board consideration, and if communication between the campus community and the public is open."* If such considerations characterize all our denominational boards, they will surely serve the church and their institutions well. ✍

*Richard T. Ingram, *Handbook of College and University Trusteeship* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), pp. 434, 435.



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