

SPD

## Adventist Education: A Proven Soul Winner

BY BARRY HILL

**T**he South Pacific Division (SPD) education system is comprised of four union systems—the Australian Union Conference (AUC), the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference (NZPUC), the Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM), and the Trans Pacific Union Mission (TPUM). The conference and mission status of the unions mark a clear divide between the rich and poor areas of our territory.

Since the previous quinquennium, our system has grown by more than 15,000 students so that we now have more than 50,000 students enrolled in 351 schools, four tertiary institutions, and two vocational schools. This is dramatic growth. The largest increase has been in PNG, which joined other churches in the New Guinea Govern-

ment Unified System in 2006. Since then, their student population has almost quadrupled. There has been high student growth in the Trans-Pacific and Australia Union as well as in all tertiary schools.



Wainibuka Seventh-day Adventist School (Fiji) receives resources from the SPD Education Department, 2009 (Fiji).

### The Pursuit of Adventist Mission and Ethos

During the past quinquennium, the SPD Department of Education has taken measures to strengthen Adventist mission and ethos in our schools. For example, in 2006, we completed a Commission on Adventist Secondary Education in which we interviewed a total of 260 principals, chaplains, teachers, and students in 19 schools across the division to find out how well schools were achieving their Adventist mission and objectives. Schools generally fared well. Then, in March 2009, the AUC Education Department conducted a major strategic consultation involving 75 of its key stakeholders. Position papers, keynote presentations, and breakout groups addressed issues such as Adventist curriculum, teacher supply, growing non-Adventist clientele, and financial viability. Pastoral and teaching ministries were powerfully united through this experience.

The division has also ensured that professional development for principals and teachers in all unions is faith-oriented and highlights Adventist distinctives. In May of 2009, SPD sponsored two unions to jointly run a leadership conference to train leaders to disciple students. Speakers such as Ben Maxson and

Bailey Gillespie helped make this occasion a spiritual high.

Many other initiatives have promoted Adventist mission and ethos in SPD schools. In 2008-2009, the division sponsored visits by education directors and principals from the two large union missions to schools in Australia and New

Zealand so that they could observe how Adventist ethos or “special character” is displayed visually and taught. Also the division and “home” unions have helped Avondale College establish an attractive Website featuring teaching as a ministry, and publish *Teach* magazine. Meanwhile, quality school chaplaincy programs continue to develop.

**Service Learning**

Service to others is a pivotal value of Adventist education. As the SPD Education Department attempts to coordinate the work of its four unions, it becomes a broker between richer and poorer systems and seeks ways to promote the value of service. One way to do this is to link schools together for mutual support. Some conference schools are sending teacher-student teams to sister mission schools every year to help with repairs and maintenance, and to strengthen teaching and learning.

**Curriculum**

Because the needs are so great, the SPD Education Department invests in curriculum development and implementation for the poorer areas of the division. While most activity is Bible-oriented, we also emphasize improvement in the basics of teaching and seek opportunities to distribute high-quality resources provided by donors. Therefore, in 2009 we sent out U.S.\$2.5 million worth of donated primary English and mathematics books to all primary schools in the Trans Pacific Union Mission.

In the past three years, we have employed a committee to develop and launch a new primary Bible curriculum. This program has been so successful that it has changed teaching and learning across the curriculum in many schools. Since 2008, we have distributed more than 1,500 teacher syllabi and 300 sets of *Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories*, and run 10 major professional development events.

Currently, the AUC and NZPUC education systems are collaborating to develop an exciting *Encounter Bible Project* whose goal is to transform Bible teaching in grades K-10. Numerous writing workshops convened in retreat settings have inspired the teachers who have been assigned to write 250 units.

**Tertiary System**

Administrators of all tertiary institutions have worked diligently to deal with the complexity of higher education. This sector faces a number of challenges, including expanding non-Adventist student enroll-

ments, the quest for credibility, difficulty in attracting qualified staff, and the global economic downturn.

Pacific Adventist University in Papua New Guinea is prominent in its territory, and its graduates are eagerly sought after. Since 2005, its policies and publications have more clearly emphasized strategic planning, research, and postgraduate work. The division’s commitment to provide better facilities has spawned more than 12 major projects. Avondale College in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia, has established a reputation for high-quality teaching and learning, gaining seven

five-star rankings in the *Australian Good Universities Guide 2010*. In January 2009, it also received an excellent report from the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Meanwhile, Fulton College in Tailevu, Fiji, has decided to relocate near Nadi International Airport, and Sonoma Adventist College in Kokopo, New Guinea, is at full capacity.

To avoid undue competition for the same stu-



Trans-Pacific Union education directors met in Honiara, Solomon Islands in 2009.



Values are highlighted at Suva Adventist Primary School in Fiji, 2009.



Vanuatu teacher graduation, 2008—where a large number of teachers received their first teaching certificate.

dents and financial resources, and to make the system more efficient, the SPD initiated a review of its tertiary system in 2006. Subsequently, we have employed an integration officer to help us affiliate our smaller colleges with Pacific Adventist University, a move that has already enhanced the quality of the division's tertiary education.

### Challenges

Our challenges are virtually the same as five years ago. In the Pacific region, we need effective leadership at all levels. Also, because many teachers lack proper qualifications, we are using retired volunteers to run a series of short courses to give school personnel the basics. Further, since governments now pay most of our teachers, some start to see themselves as government employees, so our task is to induct them into “real” Adventist thinking.



Students attend chapel at Jones Adventist College, Solomon Islands.

A set of challenges has emerged because of the departure of the large expatriate contingent for many years, creating gaps in local leadership development and resourcing. Consequently, schools now have few resources, particularly in the areas of library books, textbooks, classroom equipment, and building maintenance. Even more pressing is the ongoing need for all staff to show initiative, be responsible and self-motivated, and to pursue excellence.

Although resources and financial viability are still an issue, and an infusion of cash would help the smaller schools, the greater challenges are faith-oriented. It is a challenge to maintain the same percentage of Adventist teachers during current school growth phase, let alone reduce the percentage of non-Adventist teachers, and as schools enroll more non-members, it is a challenge to maintain their Adventist ethos. There is the need to promote education as soul winning to administrators, to retain ownership of schools by churches, and to strengthen teacher spirituality.

### Looking to the Future

Although the challenges point the way forward, we have learned that it is not the best strategy to pursue too many initiatives at once. In the tertiary sector, we want a well-affiliated system moving to achieve full integration. We also aim to see Fulton College relocated, to establish a small teacher-education institution in the Solomon Islands, and to help Avondale College attain university status. Our quality-assurance program must ensure genuine accountability that includes effective appraisal and support, and a better school accreditation process. We want to develop an effective secondary Bible curriculum and higher teacher accountability and skill levels through long-term school-based professional development.

Education in the South Pacific Division is a proven soul winner, a ministry that is growing rapidly. The future looks bright. ✍



**Barry Hill** is the Director of Education for the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists in Warrongga, New South Wales, Australia.