

# Christian Education in the Urban Setting: Facing Realities and

## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES



**D**espite its unassuming beginnings, Seventh-day Adventist education has been one of the church's most successful ministries.<sup>1</sup> The quinquennial world division education reports reveal that the Adventist Church serves nearly two million students worldwide in 7,946 schools from primary through postgraduate levels with 96,388 teachers.<sup>2</sup> Adventist schools reported 264,579 baptisms in the past quinquennium (2010-2014) and have been celebrated by more than one study and anecdotal story as demonstrating higher quality than their public education counter-

parts.<sup>3</sup> In some places in the world, national leaders and local employers express preference for graduates of Adventist schools, citing their academic and professional prowess—and most significantly—their honesty and reliability.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, throughout its history, the Adventist Church has faced great challenges in educational endeavors. From the early years, church leaders have called for reforms to align Adventist schools and their programs of study more closely with the church's educational philosophy in its mission of preparing workers for the denomination. Over time, and in various locations as Adventism has spread world-

wide, the church's educational institutions have been called beyond their original bounds to address the current needs of the general public in various developing nations.

Interestingly, critiques have made two seemingly conflicting demands: that Adventist education itself be transformed, and that it become an agent of transformation in the church and society at large.<sup>5</sup> Adventist leaders and educators were more involved in societal issues and secular education in the church's early history at a time when Adventism was making a commitment to education as a key ministry. In more recent years, the intersections of secular society and

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Adventist education have been less evident, though needs throughout the world are at least as great as those of former years (perhaps even greater), and in a number of places, governments are calling on Adventist education to address societal challenges.

Moreover, today, the world wrestles with a range of long-established and mounting inequities associated with both access and outcomes of education, which are grounded in economic and social disparities.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true in major cities. Yet, while devastating to individuals and society, the challenges associated with poverty, marginalization, and other detrimental circumstances in life are neither inevitable nor irreversible, and education can make a positive difference.

### **An International Dilemma**

Throughout history, education has been both credited with enlightening and liberating major populations and criticized for deceiving and subjugating various people groups. Education has been promoted as fundamental to ensuring equality, peace, health, prosperity, and liberty. Where societies have embraced noble aims for education, the result has been principled and effective actions, yielding social transformation and development. In contrast, when societies have used education as a tool of deception, oppression, or intellectual subjugation, the results have been devastating: poor-quality education for the masses that produces substandard academic outcomes, weak national and regional economies, perpetuation of national and individual poverty, and socio-political suppression.

### **The Ongoing Quest for Positive Outcomes**

Almost three decades ago, Lisbeth Schorr<sup>7</sup> shared her confidence that by working together, those with the means could prevent damaging outcomes for young people and break the cycle of disadvantage. Speaking broadly, she issued a challenge for better performance and outcomes from urban education.

Schorr declared that all citizens, even if not acting from altruistic motives, have a vested interest in improving the lives of those around them: “We all pay to support the unproductive and incarcerate the violent. We are all economically weakened by lost productivity. We are all diminished when large numbers of parents are incapable of nurturing their dependent young and when pervasive alienation erodes the national sense of community.”<sup>8</sup> Schorr’s research demonstrated that high-risk families need intensive assistance in health care, social services, family support, and education, which holds true today.

James White, co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, saw education as a means to mission, observing that “a well-disciplined and informed mind can best receive and cherish the sublime truths of the Second Advent.”<sup>9</sup> God is calling us to move forward now to put Adventist education at the heart of our mission to the big cities.

### **Mission to the Cities**

For the first time in Earth’s history, more than half of the population live in cities. Millions of people have flocked to large urban settings in search of adequate food supplies, potable water, professional health care, sustainable employment, permanent shelter, and safety.<sup>10</sup> This often overwhelming influx of diverse populations increases economic, academic, cultural, political, and social demands on cities already struggling to meet the needs of their current inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> In response, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has declared a bold emphasis on mission to the cities that calls for every entity of the church to set this mission as a top priority. To this end, mission to the cities demands the widespread, comprehensive involvement of Adventist education as a key element in bringing hope and relief to urban centers.

Against this backdrop of adversities and prospects, what can our schools do to address these realities and overcome

the challenges faced by the world’s urban population? This issue of *THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION* will focus on how we can structure our educational efforts in urban contexts in order to provide high-quality education to our constituencies and support the church’s mission to the cities. The authors in this special issue have sought to identify and clarify the essential concerns, and to provide recommendations to church leaders and Adventist educators who have accepted the call to navigate the challenges and opportunities in the world’s great metropolises.

Education, along with health care, is one of the primary means for reaching the cities and helping to improve lives and communities. To achieve these objectives, however, Adventist educational programs must be designed differently from traditional models. Studies have shown that programs designed to help families and children living in concentrated poverty and social dislocation differ in fundamental ways from traditional programs that work for people in less-devastating circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Education in urban centers most often demands a range of services beyond the usual classroom experiences. Adventism can build on its foundational principles of applying wholistic approaches to education, health care, and ministries for addressing needs in urban centers.

To be fully successful, urban education, indeed all education, must conform to the principles presented in Scripture and explicated in Ellen White’s writings. It must be founded on and aligned with God’s original purpose for restoring humanity. Yet, while the church’s models for urban education must remain uniquely Adventist in principle and philosophy, they must change significantly in scope and application.

### **Unique Challenges for Urban Education**

Schools in urban areas often have large, diverse populations, many poor and/or academically unprepared students, budget shortfalls, bureaucratic

administrations, social and political complexities, and challenges created by growing enrollments combined with shrinking resources.<sup>13</sup> Despite the success stories of some urban schools, both news reports and research indicate that quality education is generally inaccessible to most students from underprivileged and marginalized groups in urban centers. Studies show a correlation between educational underachievement and the challenges of urban environments, such as poverty, destabilized homes and neighborhoods, gang activity, insufficient school funding, and fractious social and political relationships.<sup>14</sup>

A wide range of international researchers, including those at The Global Cities Education Network (GCEN) and The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), have identified commonly experienced challenges to educational success in urban settings. The GCEN discovered and articulated commonalities among challenges and strategies used to address them in urban systems, which transcend borders and cultures around the world.<sup>15</sup> Consistent with other literature, the NCLD's summary of its findings is subdivided into structural and cultural challenges.<sup>16</sup>

**1. Structural challenges** are physical and operational elements that collectively create internal and external barriers to school success. These include:

- *Limiting stereotypes:* The tendency of educators to place urban families and their children's likelihood of succeeding academically in a negative framework.<sup>17</sup>

- *Lack of instructional coherence:* Often, remedies to educational obstacles fail to focus on the real issues or to align with specific needs for student success.<sup>18</sup>

- *Inexperienced and/or uncommitted teaching staff:* New teachers are often assigned to urban schools, while more experienced teachers seek out more comfortable conditions in suburban schools.<sup>19</sup>

- *Dysfunctional or non-existent data-*

*management systems:* Many urban schools either do not have a system of data collection or underuse data and information that would enable them to identify student needs, monitor their progress, and evaluate school practices.<sup>20</sup>

- *Low expectations:* Urban school cultures often do not promote high academic expectations among all students,<sup>21</sup> and use tracking constructs that direct disadvantaged students to less-challenging instruction. Frequently, a lack of readiness for school or for particular learning tasks is interpreted as a lack of intellectual ability and academic potential.<sup>22</sup>

**2. Cultural challenges** include those beliefs identified "generally as cultural dissonance that manifests itself in policies, practices, beliefs, and outcomes in myriad interconnected ways."<sup>23</sup> These create barriers to student success, including:

- *Perceptions that race, nationality, class, and language predict limited school success:* Research provides compelling evidence that in most urban centers, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class still influence educational and other inequities. Socio-economic status also remains a powerful influence on school outcomes<sup>24</sup>;

- *Perceptions of certain learning styles as intellectual deficiencies;* and

- *Policies and practices that demonstrate a lack of cultural awareness and/or responsiveness to diverse cultures and needs.*

## Facing the Challenges

Randy White, in his book *Encounter God in the City*, recalls a bumper sticker with the succinct message: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."<sup>25</sup> Not only are many Christians not outraged at these distressing societal realities, we have so individualized and internalized our faith that it has become disengaged from social systems altogether, in effect becoming "privately engaging but socially irrelevant."<sup>26</sup> White further charges that "we can't imagine allowing anything to disrupt our lives, certainly not involve-

ment in the complexities of community transformation."<sup>27</sup>

We must remember that "Jesus' special concern for the poor extended to all the marginalized, weak, and socially ostracized. In sharp contrast to His contemporaries, Jesus demonstrated a special interest in the disabled, children, drunkards, prostitutes, and lepers [cf. Luke 7:32-50; 19:1-10]."<sup>28</sup> Ellen White speaks of the Adventist Church's institutions as giving "character to the work" so that in them the gospel should be the "great leading power."<sup>29</sup> Taking a broad view of the gospel, she wrote: "The character of God, whose likeness we are to receive, is benevolence and love. Every faculty, every attribute, with which the Creator has endowed us is to be employed for His glory and for the uplifting of our fellow men."<sup>30</sup>

God has set us in the world and established our institutions to be blessings to those in need. "The most important work of our educational institutions at this time is to set before the world an example that will honor God."<sup>31</sup>

To achieve a broader range of success, educators must seek to contextualize teaching and learning endeavors through the application of culturally responsive practices.<sup>32</sup> In order for educators to understand those they serve, they must draw close to them through personal association in daily life. They must participate in the communities they serve, functioning in the world as salt and light.<sup>33</sup> As Freire asserted, "to become soaked in the cultural and historical water is very insightful."<sup>34</sup>

Ellen White's charge to the first Adventist educators in 1872 is still relevant today. She emphasized the church's expectation for these teachers to be reformers, combining practical and academic education.<sup>35</sup> She called for educational practices that would "be of an altogether higher order than the traditional education" of their time. She charged them to teach practical Christianity, to make the Bible the highest, most important textbook.<sup>36</sup> This guid-

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ance implies biblical principles for living and loving service that bring hope and healing to those around us. She called for transformation even before the Adventist system took shape.

Quinn asserts that “Transforming a human system usually requires that we transform ourselves.”<sup>37</sup> Adventists recognize that our organizations and institutions are more than human systems. Although our education system was established by and continues to be managed by faithful individuals, its foundation is based on biblical principles of redemption. Adventist organizations and institutions belong to God. Thus, they can be transformed only through the power of God. The implication is that we must examine our worldview and understand ourselves and our mission in view of this monumental task set before us. Indeed, personal reformation is the goal of education for teachers and students alike.

### **An Urgent Call to Action**

As we model godly transformation and lead others in this direction, we cooperate with God in outreach to the world; in this case, a ministry to the big cities. The Adventist Church has finally committed to ensure that all its organizations and ministries give priority to the growing challenge of urban mission.<sup>38</sup> As populations shift to urban centers and societies struggle to relate to and assimilate individuals from diverse backgrounds, the Adventist Church can draw on its biblical roots and historical successes to identify and adapt educational practices that will be effective for the range of challenges and opportunities. It is apparent, even to a casual observer, that there are global needs for transformation in education, particularly for urban settings. We must act with urgency and continue to cultivate the commitment to the cities.

### **Responsibility and Response**

While we continue to educate Adventist young people in traditional rural and suburban settings, we must also expand our efforts to meet the challenges of our members who for various reasons reside in the big cities. Further, we must do more, as our church’s working policy prescribes, to meet the needs of “other children and youth of the community who share similar values and ideals.”<sup>39</sup>

Ellen White warned that “as a church, as individuals, if we would stand clear in the judgment, we must make more liberal efforts for the training of our young people, that they may be better fitted for the various branches of the great work committed to our hands.”<sup>40</sup> Historically, we have applied this injunction solely to the education of Adventists. Could it be that this call includes reaching out to “young people” outside our faith and geographical communities who also need the blessings of true education?

Our Adventist pioneers recognized the dilemma of operating institutions in the world while not becoming one with the world. Though they strove to distinguish themselves from the world in perspective, purpose, and pursuits, they did not retreat from society or operate in a vacuum as they developed the church’s educational philosophy and standards. They understood that God expected them to make a difference in the world through service to others, and they participated in the public arena by standing for right, serving for change, and sharing hope.<sup>41</sup> But today, Adventists often hesitate to get involved in public affairs, except perhaps in the areas of health care and guarding Sabbath-keeping rights. Is this due to reticence or just a lack of clarity about the responsibility for the education and needs of those outside our faith group?

Many other Christians also puzzle over their responsibilities for educating the masses. A 2012-2013 Barna Group study found that while most Christians and pastors of various faith groups in the United States recognized and ac-

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cepted a responsibility for the education of all people, they were confused regarding the means, methods, and degree to which they should become involved.<sup>42</sup> The Adventist Church also grapples with these questions when it comes to (1) expressing opinions on public education and (2) providing Adventist education for non-members.

Then further, the Adventist Church struggles with a dilemma associated with ministry to and in the cities resulting from Ellen White's advice to move to the country—to flee the cities. Some among us—both members and leaders—seem to have taken this admonition to heart with little regard for her equally commanding call for ministry to and in the cities. She appeals for all to awaken to the needs and asserts: “A beginning is now to be made, and means must be raised that the work may go forward.”<sup>43</sup>

To fully embrace mission commitments to the world's cities, church leaders must agree that education is indispensable in accomplishing this work. The goal of having in every city an influential Adventist presence actively engaged in a comprehensive mission, using Christ's method of ministry,<sup>44</sup> will not achieve its full potential unless Adventist education is an integral component in its implementation. So then, what can Adventists do to bring hope and advancement through education for the billions in urban settings?

As a church, we must take the initial steps. First, we must acknowledge, draw from, and build upon the successful structures and methods of Adventist schools already serving in urban settings. Next, we must create and set in motion an operational plan. A successful contemporary model for initiating action that aligns with Adventist operational philosophy is Kotter's “8-Step Process for Leading Change,”<sup>45</sup> which provides an inspirational guide for moving forward in ministry to the big cities.<sup>46</sup> Kotter refers to this process as

“The Big Opportunity,” which accurately characterizes the occasion we now have in Adventist education. This model, adapted here for our context, suggests that leaders and other change agents do the following:

1. *Create*: Begin with the opportunity and its urgency to inspire workers to embrace the mission.

2. *Build*: Assemble a small group of capable, willing workers to lead and support the mission.

3. *Form*: Craft a vision for steering the mission, then develop strategic actions to achieve the vision.

4. *Enlist*: Raise a large force of ready and willing workers who sense the urgency of the mission.

5. *Enable*: Eliminate obstacles, change systems, and revamp structures to ensure support for the mission.

6. *Generate*: Track, evaluate, and celebrate mission accomplishments on both small and grand scales.

7. *Sustain*: Build on successes, cull impediments to mission, and revive workers through development.

8. *Institute*: Make clear the alignment between new behaviors and successes, and ensure leadership development to maintain the mission.

## Recommendations

Transforming schools, according to Freire,<sup>47</sup> will involve serious work in retraining educators, clarifying worldview and ideology, calling for commitments specific to urban work, and developing teachers' professional and missional capacities. While Freire addressed public education, we can readily apply these insights to urban Adventist education as we attempt to tackle the current challenges of the big cities. Analyses of current population

and educational statistics—both public and Adventist—indicate possibilities for the following actions:

1. *Revisiting Ellen White's counsel:*

Church leaders must continue to restudy, apply, and teach Ellen White's admonition and urgency regarding ministry for and in the cities: "Our cities are to be worked. To devote our efforts to other worthy enterprises, and leave unworked our cities, in which are large numbers of all nationalities, is not wise."<sup>48</sup>

2. *Collaborating:* Church leaders, institutional leaders, and pastors must work with members to achieve greater clarity on institutional mission within urban contexts in relation to the cities' wide range of diversity in cultural perspectives and needs for institutional services, in order to select or create appropriate models for ministry and service.

3. *Strengthening existing schools and building/purchasing new ones:* Church leaders must identify specific opportunities to strengthen existing Adventist schools located in urban settings, and act upon opportunities to address unmet needs by establishing in large urban centers mission-focused schools specifically designed to address systemic problems.

4. *Establishing schools as centers of hope:* Education leaders and pastors in tandem with missions and community service leaders, with support from the world church, must seek to establish schools as centers of life, hope, and healing in urban communities. These must be resourced to address the needs of families beyond the scope of typical educational services and will need to extend beyond the regular school schedule and calendar.

5. *Initiating conferences:* Education leaders, in collaboration with classroom teachers, should schedule annual international conferences on urban education that address specific needs that are shared worldwide in educating children and youth in urban environments. With support from the world church, such conferences would bring together educators, pastors, community-service

leaders, health-care professionals and other key stakeholders with an interest in urban education and its challenges and opportunities.

6. *Establishing partnerships:* Church and institutional leaders must form partnerships to study the needs within large urban centers, and act on the findings with support from world church and division education leaders, missions and community-service leaders, and agencies such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) to formalize and implement plans for increasing formal education and providing supplemental educational services for the general populations of the big cities.

7. *Redesigning teacher-education programs:* With support from world church education leaders from all levels, educational administrators must design and implement teacher-education programs (and other courses of study) at selected Adventist colleges and universities that emphasize mission service and provide comprehensive education on how to serve urban populations.

8. *Launching mission-focused degree programs:* Education administrators and church leaders must increase attention to education and health ministries in missions degrees, pastoral-development programs, and in-service education. When teachers and leaders have been trained specifically for ministry to the cities, the local and world church must sponsor them as "missionaries" in Adventist urban schools and communities.

9. *Building community:* Church leaders must encourage educators and pastors to participate more directly and more often in the affairs of community/public education and family-services endeavors in the cities. This will require developing or strengthening partnerships with urban organizations to meet the full range of family needs and to provide greater educational opportunities for urban students that ex-

tend beyond the regular school schedule and calendar.

10. *Meeting community needs:*

Church leaders, pastors, and educators must inspire and prepare local church members to better support Adventist education in all its forms (traditional church schools as well as mission-focused urban schools) through financial and organizational means and hands-on participation (volunteerism) in order to meet the general needs of families and communities—for example, by providing marriage-enrichment seminars, parenting education and training, healthful-living programs, and so forth.

## Conclusion

Gary Krause, director of Adventist Mission for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, sounded an urgent alert to the church in his 2012-2013 message, *Embracing the Cities*. Quoting from Stone and Wolfeich, he recalled, "Wednesday, May 23, 2007, should have been a wake-up call to Adventists serious about Christ's commission to go into all the world. Researchers estimate that on that day, the world's demographic center of gravity changed. For the first time in history, a majority of the world's population were now living in urban areas."<sup>49</sup> But, Krause pointed out, most Adventist churches, institutions, services, agencies, and members remain outside the cities.<sup>50</sup> This must change.

Now is an opportune time for Seventh-day Adventists to act decisively for and in large urban settings. Just as Adventists recognize that the conditions in the world are consistent with our eschatological view and believe that we are called to urgently proclaim the gospel, so should church leaders and educators recognize that these conditions also provide the impetus and opportunity for us to bring hope and betterment to the world through education in urban settings. If we follow the guidance we have received and remain open to the Spirit's leading, we can improve the lives of people in urban settings through our ministry of

education in alignment with health ministries and evangelism.

It is time that Seventh-day Adventists become more visible and active in urban affairs. Although Ellen White acknowledged and warned against the perils of city life,<sup>51</sup> she also pointed out that we have neglected God's command to go to the cities for far too long and must now act in decisive ways.<sup>52</sup> She declared that human beings "were not created to be subject to poverty, disease, and suffering, not for thoughtless inattention to their physical and spiritual wants, but for dignity, purity, and elevation of character in this life, and for joy unspeakable and full of glory in the future immortal life."<sup>53</sup> She also recognized that the task would not be an easy one, but added reassurance that: "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."<sup>54</sup> The world is crying out for successful wholistic educational models that address the myriad needs in metropolises around the globe. God has provided us with a model of core principles as the guiding charter. Our task is to take united, effective action to address the ever-increasing needs of urban settings and expand the scope of Adventist education in the big cities. ☞



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