

EDUCATION

THE MINISTRY OF TEACHING

Four steps lie beyond the transmission of information.

BY GEORGE H. AKERS

When the church historians chronicle the 1988 Annual Council actions, they might well pronounce the new Ministry of Teaching credentialing program voted for Adventist teachers to be a landmark declaration for Adventist education.

For the first time in Adventist history, career Christian teachers are being recognized as parity partners with Adventist ministers in sacred ministry. Although their arenas and approaches differ, their mission is the same.

The public installation service, celebration, and setting aside of a Christian teacher to the holy and sacred work of education will be akin to the pastor's ordination—though it will be called an educator's "commissioning."

This new credentialing has not been tied to any wage-scale benefits, for its only motivation lies in an appropriate idealization and positioning of Christian teaching before Adventists and the Adventist teacher corps—especially young persons who are in search of a worthy life-work.

The highest stage of career advancement in this new credentialing program will not be automatic by tenure. As with the ministerial interns, it will be reserved for those who have demonstrated proof of their calling and commitment to the sacred work of Christian education, having been formally nominated by their educational supervisors and local constituency.

This new classification comes in recognition of the teacher's effectiveness in the *full range* of youth min-

istry, involving much more than the mediation of subject matter in the classroom and other conventional expectations of the profession.

Yes, the Adventist teacher is indeed more than just a "professional." He or she is a kind of minister. These moms and dads and Adventist families around the world who have sacrificed for their children's Christian education have comprehended this instinctively. They know that certified Adventist teachers are equipped academically with the professional know-how to do respectable work in the classroom with their precious offspring, and they know that much more than just a good basic education is going on in that little church school—and of course in our academies, colleges, and universities! All of which prods me to reflect on the lofty idealism and higher order considerations represented in this new credentialing program.

The Adventist teacher ascends five rungs of the ladder of masterful Christian teaching, *four levels beyond the mere professional*. Let us consider them.

Level 1. The Professional in education who possesses only the requisite skills in subject matter content and pedagogy has only begun to climb. That represents just the lowest rung. But for the Adventist teacher four steps lie beyond—much more than the mere transmission of information. It is that "much more" that distinguishes a dedicated Christian teacher from a secular teacher. It is a powerful dimension and the very essence of Adventist education—an education

that impacts the *entire life* of a developing young person.

This essence gives Adventist Christian education potency and constitutes one of the cardinal reasons that it's worth all the sacrifice and effort. Don't settle, Mom and Dad, for just a level-one teacher—a mere professional. If you do, your child will miss out on so much.

Level 2. The Parent Partner role is undertaken deliberately by the Adventist teacher who wants no disjunction between the child's two major worlds, that of home and that of the Christian school. Each must flow into the other as a seamless gown, with no clash of moral or religious values.

Granted, this also can be characteristic of the dedicated secular teacher to some extent, but in the Christian school a special kind of home-school linkage exists, a warm and emotive caring. The Christian teacher accepts the parent surrogate role, with genuine interest and involvement that says (not only to the younger ones, but to teenagers and college students, too): "I suffer when you do, I really do. As if I were your own mom or dad. And I take a special measure of pride when you succeed in anything; I am eager to rejoice with you. Know that you can come to me any time for a heart-to-heart talk and be confident that I'll not betray you. I'll listen and advise, as if you were my very own. You see, I'm committed to you in this very personal way, my student; it's the best way I know of to show you what God is really like."

But this is only the second level in the progression upward in the steps of a master teacher. For the committed Christian teacher, though, it's a launching platform!

Level 3. The Pastor Partner is an apt designation for the Christian teacher who teams up with the local pastor to plan and orchestrate the religious exposures for the student body, experiences calculated to bring each child or youth to a decision for Christ.

So it is not awkward or out of role for the Christian teacher to conduct religious services with the class, to concern himself or herself with the eternal destiny of each student, and to be able to discuss religion with him or her—in or out of the classroom—as freely and naturally as the weather. No question about it, this pastoring role of the Christian teacher is a potent spiritual force in the life of the student and constitutes a molding and shaping influence of no small magnitude. Quite a professional assignment, isn't it, this conscious monitoring and nurturing of student spiritual development? So unlike anything expected of the secular teacher!

Yet the Christian teacher happily accepts this challenge to serve as resident ambassador for Christ, a key player in the youth evangelism team. Even so, two more levels lie beyond in this dedicated ministry to youth. Still "much more."

Level 4. The Teacher as Prophet. In her educational writing, Ellen White frequently refers to Adventist schools as *modern* schools of the prophets.

This reference is not coincidental. She explains that these ancient schools in their heyday graduated a volume of young prophets, whose spiritual influence lingered long in the nation and laid the foundations for the golden age of Israel.

Note that the faculties of these schools were composed of practicing prophets who mentored the young, helping them to see everything from God's point of view so that they could better speak for Him.

Prophets have always come in two categories: those who "speak forth" (speak out), and those who "forth-speak" (speak of the future—predict).

Many of the Old Testament prophets and some in the New were largely in the first category: they didn't write great time-line prophecies or report visions, but just served as God's special mouthpieces for the contemporary age, critiquing day-to-day life, exhorting,

pleading, rebuking in love, warning God's people of judgment to come.

Theirs is not to drift with the times and make a sweet accommodation with the prevailing culture, but to "speak forth," prodding God's children to be the *true "counter culture."* We are a prophetic people, called to *confront and transform the culture*, not merely to reflect it.

Adventist teachers are prophets too, in the highest sense of the word, unapologetically so, serving in the modern Adventist schools of prophets.

With fear and trembling, and holy joy, the modern Adventist teacher corps and its hosts, Adventist schools, embrace this prophetic assignment and speak with moral authority to God's people and to the world. As exalted and fearsome as this high calling is, it is not the absolute pinnacle, though. There is one more rung on the ladder yet to go, the quintessence of consecrated service to youth.

Level 5. The Teacher as Priest. All the previous roles of the Christian teacher are more or less public roles. The last is very private, and probably the most telling for eternity, for it releases the explosive, providential, purging power of the supernatural into the lives and affairs of the Christian teacher's young charges. It involves heaven in the battle of life like nothing else can, and tips the battle in God's favor.

This role takes place in the private prayer chamber of the professional/parent/pastor/prophet teacher, where as priest for his or her class, and particular individuals as needed, this teacher-priest intercedes and pleads for these students: "I come in the name of Jesus, humbly and gratefully as Julia's priest as You have authorized and directed. I claim her for Your eternal kingdom and ask that You build a heavenly hedge about her today and intervene in a very special way in her case. I offer myself to be used in this way; may I be so favored and priv-

ileged to be an instrument of Your grace in her life."

If the curtain could be drawn aside, we would see what heavenly assistance enables, what dramatic results accrue from this kind of persistent priestly praying. Only the hereafter can adequately chronicle the full impact of godly teachers interceding for their students.

Such is the cumulative effect of dedicated Christian teachers deeply involved in the lives of their students—teachers who earnestly endeavor to mount *all five rungs of the ladder*, to achieve completeness in their sacred ministry with young people.

For the Adventist family determined to have their children in such an inspired teaching-learning environment, Christian education becomes, understandably, a nonnegotiable imperative. Even more, it is recognized as another of the spiritual luxuries provided for us in the (temporarily) earthbound family of Christ.

Christian Education an Adventist Doctrine?

I hope that someday we might affirm this sacred ministry even further, and acknowledge Isaiah 54:13—"And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children"—as *one of the fundamental beliefs* of Seventh-day Adventists.

It would be a forthright declaration about Christian education as an Adventist birthright (see also Deut. 6:1-5). All new converts to our church might then, as part of their induction, come to comprehend how serious we are as a people about this God-intended, God-mandated spiritual legacy to our children. □