

Adventists require top faculty, trustees to be church members: Some fear harm to academic standing

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In a move that internal critics say will hurt academic standing, leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have voted to require all tenured faculty and board members at its educational institutions to be members of the denomination.

The decision was announced October 11 during an Annual Council meeting at Adventist world headquarters at Silver Spring, Maryland.

Despite its sectarian beginnings in the 19th century, the denomination is known for its medical and humanitarian missions and major educational institutions such as Loma Linda University in California. Partly because of their adherence to a Saturday observance of the Sabbath, the Adventists have been advocates for the separation of church and state along with mainline Protestant bodies and Jewish agencies.

Proponents of limiting top teaching and board posts to Adventists argued that it is difficult to transfer the church's mission and vision to the next generation when professors at its institutions do not fully subscribe to church beliefs, according to the Adventist press service.

Several delegates objected, however, saying that it would be difficult to find and hire qualified Adventist faculty members, especially at medical educational facilities where some positions require special expertise. Sharing Adventist values is more important than doctrine at such institutions, said one.

"Some of our non-Adventist faculty members hold as dearly to our mission as we do to our doctrines," said Dr. Allan Handsides, director of the church's health ministries department.

Questions were raised about state and national antidiscrimination policies in regard to withholding tenure.

Adventist president Jan Paulsen said that exceptions could be made by individual institutions in the U.S. and abroad when the new policy conflicts with prevailing laws. Also, Paulsen said that current board members who are not Adventist (their number was undetermined at the meeting) would not be dropped; the policy will apply only to new board members. "We must ever keep in mind the high and sacred calling of the church," he said.

Nevertheless, Gordon Bietz, president of Southern Adventist University, voiced concern that the policy would make the denomination's schools "isolated and parochial."