

# An Interview With Robert H. Pierson

by Ron Graybill

*The chief business of the General Conference Session in Vienna will be the choosing of the church's leaders. In the pages that follow, SPECTRUM brings you interviews of four top church administrators, on all of whom delegates will be making decisions in July.*

*Readers may learn from these interviews something of the ideals and priorities of these men, and in this way be better prepared to carry out their duties responsibly, whether at the General Conference session or in the life of the church in general.*

*The first interview, with Robert H. Pierson, the current president of the General Conference, took place in Washington, D.C., January 2, 1975. It has been edited for the sake of brevity.*

**G**raybill: What is the most satisfying of your accomplishments as a church administrator so far?

*Pierson:* I'd like to reword your terminology just a little, and speak of the blessings of God and of the progress that all of us together as

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workers and members have made in striving toward the goal the Lord has set for us.

There are a number of ways, I think, that the Lord has blessed us. One of the most satisfying has been the response to the challenge for evangelism. Our baptisms have increased very substantially. I think in 1965 they ran about 135,000, if I'm not mistaken, and in 1973, there were about 215,000, and we hope that 1974 will go beyond that. When I speak about evangelism, I don't mean just public evangelism—preaching. To me, evangelism includes all the encounters with Christ that take place in our schools and hospitals, even in our Harris Pine Mills and our food businesses. All of these things can and should and must be evangelistic. Our main goal and objective is to get a people ready for the coming of Jesus.

Another thing that I've been very pleased and happy about is the return to the church of so many of the dissidents who have caused the church some problems. You probably know about the various movements that started in Europe during the first World War. There have also been dissident movements in South America and Africa and in Australia and here in America. During the last eight years, after we made the appeal for unity, revival and reformation, many of these folks have come back into harmony with the church.

*Graybill:* Now, in some of these cases, for instance with the "Awakening" movement, the church has not only made an official appeal, but

has also taken a great deal of time to discuss these things with movement leaders. Is that part of the effort?

*Pierson:* I think this has been one of the contributing factors under the blessing of God. Our leaders in Australia have spent many hours with them. Our leaders and our top theologians here in America have spent a good many hours with them—several days, as you know.

I believe that we ought to be pulling the church together. And while there are many divergent elements in the church because this message has gone to every kindred tongue and people, yet I believe that today we have as fair a spirit of unity as we could expect in this world.

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Now, that doesn't mean that we have perfect unity, but when it comes to the racial and nationalism problems you will find actions on the General Conference minutes and on the minutes of many of our organizations that seek to take away these middle walls of partitions and make us one. We must be one here if we are going to be one in the kingdom. I believe that our black brethren, our brown brethren and our white brethren are working together much better than they might have been, and much better than they're doing in the world around us. And for this I am deeply appreciative.

I'm not suggesting that all the problems have been solved, or that all the inequities have been removed. This is not the case, but we're working toward that end, and with God's help, we will continue.

Another thing that gives me a great deal of satisfaction—and I'm not saying this because a member of the White Estate happens to be interviewing me—is the emphasis on the Spirit of Prophecy. I believe that God placed this gift in the church for all our people around the world. I don't believe that this is an American gift. It has been my desire ever since I came into the

General Conference to give full support to the White Estate in getting the books out in as many different languages as possible, and to help our members everywhere to understand better the place of the Spirit of Prophecy in the last-day church. We recommended that a program of Spirit of Prophecy emphasis be conducted in every division, and this has been accomplished. It isn't just a little old American woman that we're trying to glorify, but a gift that God has placed in this church to help us through the difficult days ahead.

And the fact that the servant of the Lord says that one of the last great attacks will be to undermine the effect of the *Testimonies* makes us feel that we ought to be certain the people are well informed concerning this gift. That's why the research center for Europe, and the one we have voted for Australia, will be such a great blessing. We hope eventually to have them in several other overseas divisions.

*Graybill:* To summarize, you are most pleased with progress in the areas of evangelism, unity and advancements of the area of Spirit of Prophecy?

*Pierson:* That's right. I don't believe we have achieved the ultimate in any of these areas, but I believe that, with God's help, we're headed in the right direction.

*Graybill:* Turning from the past to the future, what do you see as the major challenges that face the church?

*Pierson:* The greatest challenge before this church today is that we each one have the experience with God that He wants us to have. This is what I've been talking about for eight and a half years and will talk about for another six months or however long the Lord grants me. I'm not going to get into a hassle with anyone on the technicalities of “perfection,” but no one has ever challenged me for preaching that *we must overcome sin*. We must get sin out of our lives so that we can be in the right relationship with our Lord. When this has happened, there'll not be any question about our working for Him and winning souls; there'll be no problem about our money's being available for the Lord's work. It's our love for Christ that lies at the bottom of the whole thing.

Our first great challenge as leaders is to lead our people into a relationship with Christ that will bring about a true revival and a real

reformation. If that comes, we don't have to measure girls' skirts or men's hair, or anything else. The Lord looks after those things for us if we'll permit this revival in our hearts.

I think another challenge before us today is to deal with the rising tide of secularism and materialism that is in the world. You know what's happened to the other churches where secularism and materialism have come in. They have a little watered-down gospel left. As a result, they've lost their faith, they've lost their schools—many of them—and they're losing some of their missions. I don't want our SDA church to go the way some of the other churches have gone. A large number of them have empty pews on Sundays. Of course, there are some of the evangelical churches that are still pretty well filled, but you can go into a lot of the other churches—and I've been in some of

them in different parts of the world—and they don't have much left. With the Lord's help, that won't happen to the Seventh-day Adventist church, because it is God's church.

Another area of challenge, of course, is the rising cost of education. With the economic uncertainty in the world today, and especially here in the United States, this is going to be a growing challenge and problem. We've set up the Board of Higher Education in an effort to help curb proliferation and duplication of courses and get right down to the basics of what we must do.

*Graybill:* What is your attitude toward lay involvement in church affairs?

*Pierson:* Well, Ron, I believe in our laity. The work will not be finished until we rally our laity to join hands with the church officers and the ministry as the Spirit of Prophecy says. I do not

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## Robert Pierson: The Burden of Evangelism

by Kit Watts

**A**n Iowa boy, Robert H. Pierson has had a full and varied 42-year career with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. After two years at Southern Missionary College, he accepted a call to pastor and be lay activities secretary for the Georgia-Cumberland Conference. It was the first step of a man who feels keenly the burden of communicating the gospel to the world in his generation.

That burden early drew him to overseas service—first as pastor and director of lay activities on the conference level in India, and later as union president in that field. He has spent 25 years in ministry outside the United States—in India, Jamaica and Trinidad, and the Trans-Africa Division.

He was in Africa in the decade when that continent was experiencing extreme political unrest. In December 1961, he was caught

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between the crossfire of the United Nations and the Katangese armies in Elizabethville for nearly a week.

Those who have worked with him in his nine-year presidency of the General Conference characterize him as a spiritual man. His all-consuming desire is to see "the work finished." He has encouraged public evangelism by all denominational leaders and engages in campaigns himself. He has set up committees to upgrade church standards.

He has opened his office and his administration to suggestions. He has a reputation for wanting to feel the pulse of what's going on, for being personable, for answering his mail promptly, and having a remarkable facility for remembering names and faces.

The unity of the church concerns him deeply. "Our church has members from almost every nation, and many of those nations have a natural animosity toward each other," he has said. "Only a real dedication to the Lord Jesus Christ can prevent us from being divided."

When Robert Pierson is not preaching, presiding at committees or boards, or working at his desk, he is writing—prolifically. It is his hobby, he says. He has authored 17 books and numerous tracts.

refer simply to lay financial support, or the handing out of literature. It is of prime importance to involve laymen in other types of endeavor as well. I hope some day to furnish an article for the *Review* on the lay representation on our boards and ad hoc committees, on our conference committees and on our advisory committees. Today, we have some very knowledgeable laymen — our excellent businessmen, professional men, well-educated, committed, godly men. I believe we ought to make every possible use of them. I hope the time will come when we will have some lay administrators in our churches so that the pastor will be able to shepherd the sheep instead of being a businessman.

We have tried in the last eight and a half years to open some of the windows in our church. We've called our laymen into counsel with us. We've started publishing the letters to the editor in the *Review*. We, as leaders, have made reports to the church in the *Review* rather frequently. Practically every place I go, not only do I preach but I have a program that I call "This Is Your Church." It is a question-and-answer service. I want the folks to know that a little group of us here in Washington do not constitute the church, but it includes every layman.

**G**raybill: Is there a trend toward more careful attention to parliamentary procedure in conference constituency meetings?

Pierson: I may not be able to answer that question the way that you wish I would. If you mean by parliamentary procedure giving everybody an opportunity to be heard, then I would be with you entirely. But when it comes to resorting to parliamentary manipulation in order to thwart or to accomplish an end, I do not believe this approach is helpful in doing the work of the church.

Graybill: But I have seen meetings where the chairman dominated the meeting in disregard of parliamentary procedure.

Pierson: I heartily disapprove of what I believe you're talking about—the chairman's or anyone else's dominating a meeting and not letting the people have an opportunity to speak. I believe in democracy. But when it comes to this kind of democracy, it ought not to be one or two people that are doing all the democratic

speaking. If there are a large number of folks who want to speak, fine.

Graybill: What do you see as the main concerns of the educated Seventh-day Adventist—those who are sometimes labeled "intellectuals." What problems do they have, what contributions can they make?

Pierson: I want to be a president for all of our people—the intellectuals as well as the most illiterate peasants out in the far-flung corners of the earth. My relationship with church members should be such that I can love and work with all of them. We have good people among the intellectuals, we have good members in the main stream of the church.

These are days when we should be making progress. We must not dig our feet in concrete and stay where we are as far as our planning, our

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programming and our policies are concerned. When it comes to certain basic tenets of this message, however, I believe these are not negotiable. There's room in the church for the expression of our opinions when it comes to peripheral issues, speculative prophecies and things like that, but when it comes to the certain basics of this message, these are the areas I don't believe are negotiable.

Graybill: Thank you. I think that concludes my questions.

**P**ierson: I'd like to mention one more topic that you haven't asked me about. This is the attitude of our church toward the role of women. I noticed recently that *Christianity Today* reported Seventh-day Adventists had turned down the ordination of women. This is

not factual. We haven't voted for or against the ordination of women yet. Some other denominations have been working on this question for years and they haven't fully made up their minds yet. Seventh-day Adventists, maybe rightly or wrongly, have only spent about a year and a half in serious study of this question. We started with a group of scholars and administrators of whom more than half were women. Some we believed would represent the more liberal approach; others we felt could be counted on to present the conservative point of view.

At the 1973 Annual Council, we adopted most of the recommendations that this study group recommended. We are continuing to study ordination. We want to be sure that theologically we're correct. We want to know that we are following the counsel of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. I personally am inclined to be a little slow in basing as important a decision as this on what the Bible *does not say*. We have women pastors in different places around the world and they've done a good work. We have approved of this.

*Graybill:* Not in North America.

*Pierson:* Yes, we've had some, but not a large number. Miss Mary Walsh and others have pastored local churches and there are some other

women who have served as pastors.

Down in the West Indies, we've had women who were evangelists, who went out and raised up churches, built church buildings, and then pastored the church. In Finland, of course, we've had women evangelists and some that have pastored churches. This has not been on a large scale, but it indicates that we are not blindly opposed to the idea.

Personally, and I'm speaking only personally, I am pleased that on a few large church staffs we have some women associate pastors who play an important role publicly and personally in the work of our modern-day SDA church. They have some input and some insights that our men do not have. I am not in any way opposed to our fine ladies' playing an increasingly important role in the life of our church.

A wife and mother with small children, I believe, still should find her greatest joy and fulfillment in filling her place as the queen of the home. There isn't any greater contribution that a woman can make than to be a wife and mother. But when it comes to women who have no children, or single women, I believe they will continue to play a more important place in our church program in almost every phase of the work. I believe we can do a lot more than we have done in the past to utilize their committed talents.