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# Adventist Colleges Under Siege

## 1. Report on Pacific Union College

by Kent Seltman

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Seventh-day Adventist higher education is under attack. Under criticism, the presidents of both Pacific Union College and Southern College have been granted leaves of absence at the end of the present (1982–83) school year. While two of the schools under siege have had the reputation of being the most conservative Seventh-day Adventist campuses in North America, the issues being raised about these two colleges touch the core of all Adventist higher education.

Pacific Union College has been at the center of controversy since Desmond Ford, then a professor in the religion department, gave a public lecture on the investigative judgment during October 1979.<sup>1</sup> Following the uproar that ensued, the faculty, administration, and board spent months investigating various criticisms without resolving the controversy. Indecision paralyzed the campus. Finally, at a special meeting of the college board on September 22, 1982, two dramatic actions occurred: President John W. Cassell, Jr., announced his resignation, and the board voted to terminate the employment of religion professor Erwin Gane.

Cassell announced his resignation—a unilateral decision, effective July 1, 1983—in his administrative report to the board before it began deliberating on other issues. His resignation was accompanied by a request

for a 15-month sabbatical, to begin post-doctoral studies in psychology and education as preparation for a return to the classroom after 27 years in educational administration on three Adventist college campuses. In announcing this to the faculty later that same day, Cassell emphasized, “There was no pressure applied. This is a purely voluntary action on my part.”

The Pacific Union College trustees fired Gane, according to Cassell, because of the “persistent criticism which Gane leveled against certain of his colleagues in the religion department in the past few years and because of his stated inability to work with the college administration.” At this same board meeting, members of the religion department with whom Gane had differed were promoted. W. Larry Richards was appointed to a four-year term as chairman of the religion department and Larry Mitchel and Wayne Judd were promoted to the rank of associate professor of religion.

These board actions are the antithesis of the demands made by several critics of the college who have been speaking and writing in recent months. These critics include a few students, some members of the faculty and staff, and at least two members of the college Board of Trustees, as well as some parents, alumni, and community members. The anonymous publications of this faction have played an important role in raising questions about the Pacific Union College faculty and administration. The material—often simply single-page documents, easily

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copied and passed on to others—list charges against specific faculty members, then tells readers to call the General Conference, union, and conference presidents, members of the conference committee, and the college board to express concern. Rumors based upon these publications were rampant.

An early example is the anonymous broadside, “Is it Right?” which appeared in the fall of 1981. Clumsily displayed on a single typewritten page, this paper asked rhetorically if a number of alleged practices were “right.” It attacked Adventist scholars and ministers rather generally, but specifically the Adventist Forum, SPECTRUM, and *Forum*, Desmond Ford, and Pacific Union College. No assertions were made, but the intent was to damn those named by questions and innuendo. The broadside urged readers to act by applying pressure upon church officials—and praying.

The fundamental charge made by these voices was that Pacific Union College had become a hotbed of heresy. Because Ford had proposed a major revision in Adventism’s sanctuary doctrine, these tracts questioned just what was going on at the college on the mountain. Broad-brush attacks on “devious” academics and a longing for the “shaking,” fired by Californian Lewis Walton and his book *Omega*, only added to the climate of suspicion.

Although many students and their parents praised Pacific Union College teachers for dealing constructively with the “hard questions” facing Adventism, others were uneasy with diversity of opinion, disturbed by the discovery that Adventist teachers could disagree with the theology of *Adventist Review* Editor Kenneth Wood, repudiate Walton’s view of Seventh-day Adventist history, or question the interpretations of the White Estate.

Major controversies ballooned from small allegations: Wayne Judd was an open friend and admirer of “Adventist heretic” Ronald Numbers; Larry Mitchel had introduced “modern scholarship” into his Old Testa-

ment classes; history teachers were “soft” on the age of the earth, or “too candid” about controversies in denominational history; Sabbath School classes were “negative” and “unduly open.”

The chorus of dissent eventually focused on three major charges: the religion department did not support “historic Adventism”; the administration was keeping Gane out of the classroom; and some faculty members were engaged in a smear campaign against the church.

After Ford left the religion department, Gane became the new center of controversy. Gane states that there were major doctrinal differences which the administration treated as personality conflicts. Whatever the base of the problem, Terrence Roberts, director of mental health and social services at the St. Helena Hospital and Health Center, was hired to conduct group counseling with the members of the religion department. When that did not solve the problems, Gane was placed on a two-year leave of absence to prepare publications for the White Estate, jointly funded by the college and the General Conference.

The charge of a smear campaign grew out of a curious event now known simply as “the singing incident.” Depressed by the mood of the church just before Consultation II, several teachers relieved their gloom by composing and privately singing hymn parodies. The songs complained that teachers must “Rust and Obey” to keep their jobs and suggested that Seventh-day Adventists might soon be singing new words to the old song, “Never Part Again”: “What, never *think* again? No-o, never think again. And soon we shall be scholarless, and never, never *think* again.” A colleague overheard these satires, and deeply shocked, took the matter to Cassell. In a process that even the originators of the parodies do not understand, garbled copies of the songs were soon circulating around

the country. In the minds of some, the songs themselves became elevated from private relaxation to a deliberate strategy of "attack poetry."

When Cassell did not respond to the demands for major changes in faculty and policy at the college, the attacks broadened to include the administration, especially the president, who was criticized for protecting and retaining faculty members "disloyal" to the beliefs and traditions of the church. Besieged by these attackers, the administration seemed unable to establish a base of power from which to act. College board members were hearing the defense of faculty members only from an administration whose integrity, they were being told by the critics, was not to be trusted.

At the request of the administration, the board, in November 1981, established a Fact-finding Committee. The committee consisted of five administrators and four board members. The board representatives on the committee were Charles Cook, president of the Central California Conference; Jerry Jolly, CPA; Janice von Pohle, attorney; and Marion Williams, businesswoman.

But by the February 1982 board meeting, this process was itself being called a white-wash by some board members. They felt that college administrators dominated the committee. So the membership was expanded to include two more members, including at least one of the critical voices, Wilmonte Penner, a dentist from Sacramento. (A second highly critical board member, Caleb Davidian, had previously refused to serve.)

Over the months, much pressure came from individuals connected with the Carmichael Church in the East Sacramento area. For instance, according to Art Milward, advisor to the 1981-82 *Campus Chronicle*, Saleem Farag, an official in the California State government (and for a few months in 1980 was director of the General Conference department of Health and Temperance), made a number of "harassing"

telephone calls to Milward because the student newspaper had published a book review critical of Lewis Walton's *Omega*. Milward explained, "Farag argued that, since the book had been approved by the Review and Herald editorial board and published by a church-owned press, it was not appropriate to publish critical reviews." Finally, in a phone conversation, Farag threatened the newspaper with a lawsuit. He also threatened Eric Anderson, Pacific Union College history professor, with a suit, because of a letter to the editor which Anderson had written during the debate over the college.

In March, the senior pastor of the Carmichael Church, Reinhold Tilstra, acting as spokesman for a group of about 20 individuals, read to the Fact-finding Committee a corporate, but unsigned statement of "concerns" about the college. Members of this group included Farag, Walton, and Davidian. A petition calling for signatures in support of "A Statement of Concern About Pacific Union College" used the mailing address of Lawrence Winn, a member of the Carmichael congregation.

This petition consists of a general statement in support of traditional, conservative Seventh-day Adventist teachings and lifestyle (as construed by its authors); then it asserts that some people at Pacific Union College violate "the historic . . . position in the areas of theology, attitude toward leadership, . . . lifestyle, and support of the Spirit of Prophecy"; and finally pledges a withdrawal of support until the board acts to "see that the true Seventh-day Adventist principles are followed at Pacific Union College." The almost 600 individuals who signed the statement reflected a broad concern that had developed.

"Unfortunately, however, those who signed were informed largely by rumors, rather than accurate first-hand information," says Cassell. "Furthermore, these rumors were being fomented by those circulating the petition. The Fact-finding Committee established the facts to the best

of its ability, and the subsequent actions of the board are consistent with the findings.”

Perhaps the most interesting of all the materials produced in this process is the 18-page statement presented by Gane to the Fact-finding Committee on May 12. In it, Gane defines his perceptions of the problems at Pacific Union College: “. . . We have represented on the staff at least two major philosophies of Christian education. One says that the purpose of Christian education is to engender a relationship with Christ and dedication to set of revealed truths, as well as to provide secular training . . . The other philosophy of Christian education at

Pacific Union College is that of the President and his supporters.” Throughout, the report clearly makes the point that the board must choose between the ideas of Professor Gane and those of President Cassell.

In the statement, Gane also explains his behavior toward his colleagues: “The ‘intolerance’ of the so-called ‘conservative’ stems from his strict loyalty to a line of truth which does not allow for co-existence with contradictory emphases. It is not that the ‘conservative’ cannot tolerate views contradictory to his own in matters other than those fundamental to the faith of Adventists. Yet, the conservative’s attitudes are inevitable, given his unwillingness to accept within an Adventist Bible department pluralistic or variegated theological em-

### Adventist Colleges Face Crisis

At a meeting of the General Conference Board of Higher Education on October 26, Dr. Robert Reynolds, its executive secretary, warned the 45 members in attendance that recent attacks of “so-called conservative loyalists” on Adventist colleges, particularly Pacific Union College and Southern College, are attacks on the integrity of the Adventist higher education. College administrators are consumed with defending their schools against these attacks, teachers are confused, and enrollments of SDA colleges in North America are suffering—a 4% decline in September 1982 from September 1981.

He thought it was not too much to say that Adventist higher education, particularly because of these attacks, was approaching a state of crisis. And since the schools are an integral part of the church, these attacks are, in fact, attacks on the church itself. What disturbed him as much as anything was the claim of those criticizing Adventist colleges to have support

from some influential leaders within the church.

These attacks came at a time when Adventist higher education is vulnerable because of population trends and economic conditions. The September 1982 enrollment in North American Adventist colleges dropped more than four times as rapidly as enrollment in private colleges and universities generally in the United States: 4.0% to 0.8%. No relief is in sight. The Board of Higher Education estimates that even if economic conditions are ignored, in the autumn of 1983 Adventist colleges will be drawing on 500 fewer graduates from Adventist academies in the United States than they did this year. (One union conference alone expects 150 fewer academy graduates next year than in 1982.) The Board expects academy graduates in the United States to continue to decline in numbers each year for several years. In fact, demographic patterns indicate a 20% decline in graduates of all secondary schools in the United States for the next decade.

phases, including both concepts which are germane to Adventism and those which are not.”

Though a central figure in the controversy, Gane resisted for several weeks the request to appear. After his appearance, he wrote in a May 25 letter to the Fact-finding Committee and others, “. . . I was subjected to extreme pressure to testify . . . I resisted this pressure from the President and others because I did not wish to be drawn into the current discussions, and because I had serious questions about the make-up of the committee.” None of those Gane had

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criticized earlier or had mentioned in his own report resisted their summons from the committee.

Gane was requested to appear before the committee, but the decision to present a written statement was his own. After copies of the report appeared in the hands of Gane supporters in Takoma Park, Maryland, four faculty members, who previously had been voted as spokesmen by department and committee chairmen, secured a copy. These professors—Milo Anderson, physics; William Hemmerlin, chemistry; James Kempster, music; and Gilbert Muth, biology—repudiated Gane’s statement in a letter addressed to the board. They argued that “It is the grossest corruption of language for a small group of willful critics who seek revolutionary changes and faculty purges in this and all Seventh-day Adventist schools to call themselves ‘conservative.’ Quite simply, Dr. Gane proposes a program of revolutionary upheaval—not conservative preservation . . . We solemnly deny Dr. Gane’s claim that Pacific Union College is divided between those with a secular, relativistic vision of this school’s mission and

the handful like Dr. Gane who ‘have not bowed the knee to Baal’ and still believe in the historic values of our educational philosophy.”

Larry Richards also replied directly to Gane in an eight-page personal letter. Gane supporters subsequently circulated this letter in an apparent effort to block the appointment of Richards as chairman of the religion department. Richards wrote, “I now see you as one who believes that Erwin Gane is the true spokesman for Adventism; that Erwin is the judge of another man’s orthodoxy; that Erwin knows better than the accused person himself whether he is an Adventist, or whether he is telling the truth about his claims; and that Erwin sees himself as more qualified to resolve church problems than many of the church leaders.” In his letter, Richards went on to identify numerous factual and argumentative problems in the Gane statement, including many items in the religion department, some pertaining to Richards himself, about which Richards had first-hand knowledge. Richards insisted Gane was wrong when he asserted that “genuine Adventism” would reject the possibility of “various points of view” being “able to co-exist” within a religion department. “In taking on Pacific Union College as you have, you have essentially taken on all of our colleges in North America,” Richards declared.

In 60 hours of meetings the Fact-finding Committee interviewed over 20 persons, and approximately 30 more as members of delegations. Motivated by the intense desire for healing, students and faculty leaders sent separate messages to the board and its Fact-finding Committee, appealing for resolution of the problems. The faculty letter, signed by all but one academic department and major academic committee chairman, urged “that the board and its Fact-finding Committee declare that the cycle in which charges followed by investigation and further charges followed by further investigation should proceed to rapid conclusion.” After considering all the evidence accum-

ulated in the six months of its investigations, the Fact-finding Committee recommended against the terminations called for by the critics.

The critics promptly acted to generate increased pressure. A significant portion of this new pressure came from the Illinois press of Vance Ferrell (1955 Pacific Union College graduate), whose *Pilgrim's Waymarks* had already contained some criticisms of Pacific Union College and Southern College. Beginning in June 1982 through the summer, Ferrell printed eight issues of his magazine. Included in it were circulars, petitions, and other documents related to the controversy, along with generous portions of commentary. After compiling 32 pages of printed material Ferrell apologized for publishing some of the information.

"However," he wrote, "a number of detailed reports were submitted to the PUC Board's 'Fact-finding Committee' over a period of five complete months with the intention that this information would reach the complete Board, be carefully discussed by this body, and then suitably acted upon be [sic] in harmony with Bible-Spirit-of-Prophecy principles. But this was not done. Therefore there is no alternative but to give the details of the whole matter to the faithful, so that enough laymen will be aroused to demand that the 'new theology' be ousted, not only from PUC, but everywhere else it may be found in North America."

Cassell characterized the content of Ferrell's publication as "gross distortions of truth, slanted reporting, and obvious misrepresentation of the facts . . ." For instance, stories and quotes from one to 15 years old are current events, Cassell says. Also, in his commentaries, Ferrell uses the labels "Fordite" and "new theology" as general pejoratives without reference to what specific individuals (even, perhaps, Desmond Ford himself) believes.

Currently 2,000 people are on Ferrell's mailing list for the tracts which he writes and prints. He said the documents on Pacific Union College came to him through "friends." He has a policy of not naming names, except for people he considers enemies. As to determining the reliability of reports, he said, "With current news it is difficult to filter fact from error."

"The administration knew that we couldn't begin a school year with these matters unresolved," says Gordon Madgwick, vice-president for academic affairs. So a special meeting of the full board was called for September 22, just before the beginning of school. Prior to this meeting of the board, Walter Blehm, president of the Pacific Union and chairman of the Pacific Union College board, and Sylvester Bietz, treasurer of the Pacific Union and vice-chairman of the board, surveyed all faculty members. Their written questionnaire covered a broad range of issues: the perception of faculty loyal to the church and the college, the ethical conduct of the board, and the effectiveness of the president and the vice-president for academic affairs. The chairman and vice-chairman also conducted one-hour discussions with the members of each academic department.

Following the two days of departmental interviews, Blehm and Bietz met with department chairmen. Blehm observed to them that the faculty is "a fine group of Seventh-day Adventist leaders with whom we are proud to be associated. People ought to get information first-hand." Blehm also noted that those who attack the college "feel that the church is in jeopardy. But they are misguided and guilty of a blanket condemnation that is not justified." Blehm and Bietz reported to all constituents in the October 18, 1982, *Pacific Union Recorder*: "After spending two full days visiting with department personnel . . . we came away thrilled and inspired with the commitment these educators have to the church, to the message of the church, and to the traditions that have made Pacific Union College a

place respected within our denominational circles.”<sup>2</sup>

Though Cassell was not voted out of office, his resignation still comes in the context of one of the most serious crises of confidence in the 100-year history of the college. Cassell stated to the faculty his opinion that “a new president may turn the college around more quickly. Every new administrator has a ‘honeymoon’ period.”

For Board Chairman Blehm, one of the great frustrations of this crisis has been the disruptive tactics adopted by a small number of the board members, who have refused to accept board decisions as final, including one action that they voted for themselves. Consequently, a tyranny of the minority developed, making it almost impossible to resolve an issue of concern to these members. “It is the ethical responsibility of board members to express their opinions in the board meetings and then to accept the majority opinion,” said Cassell, “but it seems that where a couple of members are unhappy about a vote, they and their friends have conducted extensive lobbying efforts to reverse the action.”

This pattern of action, of course, raises the question of whether the issue is now settled. Although Ferrell said he is tired of the Pacific Union College subject, he plans to publish material showing how Gane was “pestered and pestered” into writing his report and then how that was used against him.

Instead of objecting to the board’s actions as a rejection of his theology, Gane now states that the board illegally terminated his contract. However, he is unsure what his next move will be. As a matter of principle, he says he does not believe in suing, but he has objected to the board action with a letter, and he hopes the board will discuss the matter again. He suggests that the board’s vote against him bodes ill for other faculty members, too, because no teacher can be confident of continuous tenure if the

board can simply cancel a contract before it expires.

However, the college points out that although the board action will terminate his employment in June 1983, 12 months before the end of a three-year contract, the school never awarded him ‘continuous’ tenure. The college also contends that Gane was dismissed “with just cause,” which means the school is not obligated to pay beyond the terminal date of the signed contract.

Another open letter now circulates: “A Host of Friends of PUC” demands of Cassell and Madgwick: (1) that recognition be given that Gane’s contract does not terminate until June 30, 1984, (2) that Cassell resign December 31, 1982, instead of at the end of June 1983, (3) that Madgwick also resign December 31, 1982, and (4) that these actions be implemented at the November board meeting. A request for additional General Conference representation is also included.

During the fall of 1982, the largest direct anti-public relations campaign yet was directed against the college. In late October, Ferrell mailed his *PUC Papers* directly to the homes of approximately 1,900 Pacific Union College students. In a phone conversation, Ferrell acknowledges that some may have been mailed by his staff in Illinois. Dorothy Pappas, an Angwin resident and 1972 Pacific Union College graduate, singlehandedly prepared all the labels and sent them to Ferrell; his organization applied the labels to envelopes for the mailing of the materials, under Ferrell’s non-profit organization, bulk-mailing permit.

“Observing the events of the past several months,” Cassell said, “a war of attrition has been waged by a vocal group of individuals who seem bent on imposing their will on the internal affairs of the institution . . . It is hard to understand how those who call themselves Christians could participate in a campaign of personal and professional vilification that has had the obvious effect of producing a crisis of confidence among our constituency. . . .

By so doing, they have played on the fears and anxieties of church members already feeling troubled and insecure over social trends within the church, attacks on the spirit of prophecy, and alleged financial mismanagement by church personnel.”

**A**dministrative techniques and the role of governing boards in Seventh-day Adventist institutions are, perhaps, partially to blame for the long duration of the problem at Pacific Union College. The Board of Trustees does not, for instance, have a specific code of ethics for its members. Also, the final decision of the board was delayed for months while waiting for a consensus. In the meantime, the administration and board invoked extraordinary measures by directly investigating faculty members. In the end, the original intentions of the administration were affirmed, but the months of delay have cost the institution dearly.

A difficult problem of these times has been the reluctance of church leaders to speak and write in support of higher education generally, not to mention specific support of Pacific Union College or Southern College. In fact, the opposite has even been the case. Many educators see the *Adventist Review* editorial, “Colleges in Trouble,” by Kenneth Wood, as the signal for attacks that have come in the past couple of years.<sup>3</sup> That a critical attitude persists, is revealed in subtle, and perhaps not even deliberate ways, such as the undermining of scholarly endeavors by a sarcastic tone in James Coffin’s recent *Adventist Review* editorial, “One Thing I Know”: “We live in an

age of education. We worship at the feet of the degreed gurus whose research and study have provided wisdom so profound that the uneducated masses can only marvel. How could these modern-day wise men be wrong? After all, are they not men of science?”<sup>4</sup>

The similarities that exist between all Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities make each campus vulnerable to the kind of campaign that two campuses have experienced. Thus, at issue is something bigger than problems on a campus or two—it is a church problem. In the long term, the fate of a viable, accredited system of Seventh-day Adventist higher education is at stake. If vicious rumor is not balanced by credible clerical voices speaking in support of higher education, income from both tuition and gifts will be further reduced, jeopardizing the financial viability of the institutions.

An uncertain financial base may be a threat to continued accreditation of the college. But the greatest danger to accreditation comes from infringements on academic freedom which lies at the heart of higher education. And unaccredited colleges cannot satisfy the higher education needs of Adventist youth seeking careers in the medical and paramedical professions, education, engineering, or law—or almost any other profession that requires certification by a graduate or professional school. Consequently, the church faces the possibility that most of its youth will not go to Adventist colleges and will either be educated in the public system of higher education or not receive a college education at all.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. For a full report on this matter see Walter Utt, “Desmond Ford Raises the Sanctuary Question,” *SPECTRUM*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 3–8.

2. W. D. Blehm and S. D. Bietz, “Board Officers Visit With PUC Faculty,” *Pacific Union Recorder*, Oct.

18, 1982, p. 8.

3. *Waymarks* No. 60, Sept. 15, 1982, p. 2.

4. James N. Coffin, “One Thing I Know,” *Adventist Review*, Oct. 21, 1982, p. 12.