
2. Report on Southern College

by Joan Marie Cook and Marie Jennings

On September 15, 1982, the Southern College Board of Trustees granted Frank Knittel, president of the school for the past 12 years, a 15-month sabbatical which will begin in June 1983. The request came after Knittel had come under pressure from the chairman of the board, and no one expects Knittel to return as president. Although A. C. McClure, president of the Southern Union and chairman of the board of Southern College, has said that the board has no plans to dismiss any other faculty members, he acknowledges that the board at its meeting in February 1983, will certainly take a look at the rehiring of faculty members and staff. Teachers, especially in the religion department, are apprehensive about their futures. Some of the faculty at Southern College feel they must explore other employment possibilities in case they are forced to leave.

Critics of Knittel claim that administrative competence is the issue. Some say his circle of advisors should have been wider, others that firmer action should have been taken to prevent a drop of enrollment in 1981 of 232 students and another drop of 51 this year.

Supporters of the president point out that the two-year drop is by no means the worst in the Adventist college system and that financially, through prudent management, Southern College showed an operating gain of more than \$250,000 in the year that ended

June 30, 1982. In fact, as of September 30, 1982, the school was \$100,000 ahead of last year's balance at that time. They think that the issue is not administrative competence, but academic freedom—the right of teachers to answer urgent questions from students determined to search for truth and to be able to answer those questions in the atmosphere of trust and support. They believe that some of the drop in enrollment was the result of a campaign to discredit the school by a determined group of critics.¹

In the spring of 1980, controversy erupted—at what had always been considered one of the most traditional Adventist schools—over the unlikely subject of masturbation. For prayer meeting one evening, the Collegedale Church showed one of the popular James Dobson films on family life. During the discussion period afterward, some church members became agitated when a teacher from the floor, said he was aware of no scientific proof that masturbation caused some of the more extreme effects suggested by Ellen White in her book, *A Solemn Appeal*.

One community resident, Florence Woolcock, became particularly incensed. In the next few days she wrote a very long letter to Knittel on the subject. When she came to interview him soon afterwards, Knittel stated that in general he agreed with the behavioral science teacher. Woolcock assumed, therefore, that he did not believe Ellen White was inspired, and she decided to do something about it.

After her talk with Knittel, Woolcock scheduled individual interviews with all the

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teachers in the Division of Religion. To her dismay, she learned that most of them concurred with the teacher's observation. Woolcock took this as proof of apostasy, because—to her—it meant that none of these men believed in Ellen White's inspiration.

However, it was not until after September 1980, when members of the theology faculty reported on Theological Consultation to a large audience in the Collegedale Church that Woolcock and others started their activities in earnest. By the start of the school in 1980, Desmond Ford had been dismissed from the faculty of Pacific Union College and the issues involving the sanctuary and Ellen White were being discussed in denominational publications. Later in the Fall, Walter Rae was dismissed. Some of the young and most popular of the theology faculty seemed to be drawn into the controversies raging through the church.

Without their knowing it, Woolcock—in the spring of 1981—began attending classes of the theology faculty. She made a practice for a time of hiding behind a heavy folding door in the room where one religion class was held. Despite the difficulties of hearing from that location, this secret scribe managed to make notes. Three to four students helped her glean information from religion classes that they considered to be heretical. (Not all the claims proved to be valid; at least one student later admitted making untrue statements.)

That semester Woolcock occasionally mimeographed materials which she sometimes attempted to hand out on campus. Finally, Knittel threatened legal action to bar her from such activity on campus, and at least one of the students helping her was not re-admitted the next school year.

In April, *Evangelica* (Vol. 2 No. 2) carried two articles by two members of the Division of Religion, Jerry Gladsen and Ed Zackrisson. The journal had been started in 1980 by students at the SDA Theological Seminary. From its first issue, *Evangelica* stressed the

importance of righteousness by faith. The two faculty members had agreed to write for the journal before it began to take what they later came to regard as an increasingly radical direction. Although no one has found fault with the content of their articles, the fact that they published articles in the magazine eventually was used against them.

Soon after the *Evangelica* articles appeared, the theology faculty gained still greater visibility. After the resignation of Smuts van Rooyen, (a former professor at Southern College) from the Andrews University theology department, Lorenzo Grant, on June 12 and 13, organized a gathering of 17 teachers from most of the Adventist colleges in North America, including Andrews University and Loma Linda University. Jerry Gladsen, Norman Gulley, and Ed Zackrisson from Southern College also attended. So did Frank Knittel, on the first day.

At the end of their session, the group delivered to the General Conference what they called "The Atlanta Affirmation," because, they said in their preamble, "of our shared commitment to the building up of the church and to the preservation of its unity." Clearly written against the background of the earlier firing of Ford and resignation of Smuts van Rooyen, the statement called attention to the "dismissal or withdrawal under pressure of certain teachers and pastors from denominational employ," and to their concern that "the credibility, and therefore effectiveness, of seminary and certain other religion faculties—made up of the very persons prepared to serve the church theologically—are now being eroded." It also said frankly that "the treatment of recent theological controversy in the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry* has not always reflected the variety of viewpoints that exist in the church and that this one-sidedness has fostered an attitude of suspicion and a sense of impotence among a substantial number of our members."

The affirmation concluded with three recommendations: "that teachers, pastors, administrators, and other church members attempt now to stop the polarizing process that threatens our unity and future as a movement by cooling rhetoric, easing tensions, and enhancing mutual trust within our community; 2) that they take frequent opportunity to express confidence in the truthfulness of the Adventist message; 3) that they continue, in light of the present situation and in faithfulness to our Lord, to learn about, examine, and renew the heritage God has given to us all."

Later, it emerged that those who had donated the funds for the conference had for tax purposes sent the money through Good News Unlimited Foundation, a procedure that Grant later conceded might not have been the wisest.

Less than ten days after the Atlanta meeting, a letter was written to all members of the Southern College Board of Trustees. It came from a source that attracted attention, Sharon McKee, wife of Ellsworth McKee. He is president of the McKee Baking Company, which distributes as far West as Phoenix, Arizona, its well-known Little Debbie snack cakes. The company's main plant is situated on the edge of the Southern College campus in Collegedale, and 200 of its some 2,500 employees are students at the college. The founder and chairman of the company, O.D. McKee, Ellsworth's father, was a founding member of Southern College's Committee of One Hundred, a group of substantial donors to Southern College, and he is reported to give 50 percent of his income to the church. As recently as the previous summer, he had pledged \$1 million to the Project '80 building fund at Southern College.

The members of the board quickly learned that the wife of the president of the McKee Bakery Company was demanding that the president of Southern College declare himself plainly on the issues confronting the denomination:

"I do not know where you stand on the Ford-Rea issues; nor do many other people. Shouldn't everyone know where you stand? It seems to me the middle-of-the road is confusing in the crisis we are now facing."

Her concern was the religion faculty. She stated that Knittel should see to it that teachers "running down" the church or its doctrine should stop being paid.

"I find it difficult to understand why certain personnel at SMC accept the position and pay for work that is contrary to the teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. . . . Those who are running down our church and doctrine should not be paid by our school or church organization . . .

"Your position demands that you take a stand. But if you do not take a stand and some of these religion teachers are maintained in their positions, the only alternative would be to drop religion courses from the requirements and allow the students to take religion courses only by their choice. It would be better to have admitted Catholics teaching than to have wolves in sheep's clothing."

Within a month, members of the theology faculty had taken another action that the chairman of the board felt, under the circumstances, was unwise and provocative.

In July Lorenzo Grant and Ed Zackrison drove from Tennessee to Atlanta to hear Smuts van Rooyen give a presentation at the local chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums. They had heard a lot of rumors about their former colleague who, after leaving the religion faculty at Andrews University, had joined Desmond Ford at the Good News Unlimited Foundation in California. They decided to take the opportunity to quiz him themselves.

The following week the two teachers, along with Knittel, were summoned to an

impromptu committee of Southern Union Conference officials gathered at the Atlanta airport. The teachers were questioned for about three hours. McClure, the union president and chairman of the college board, was very displeased. He stated that he understood that the teachers had been advised not to attend the meeting; the teachers recall that he therefore considered them uncontrollable and insubordinate. Still the teachers felt that, on the whole, the meeting had finally ended with good understanding on both sides.

But they were soon chilled to learn that McClure refused to allow an expression of support he had already written for the theology department to be printed in the *Southern Tidings*. When the introduction to the statement signed by all the religion faculty affirming their commitment to the Adventist church and its beliefs appeared in the *Southern Tidings*, it was introduced by Knittel. McClure's action was particularly upsetting to the faculty because they had followed the advice of union conference officials to refrain from responding to criticisms until the union president and faculty made their joint statements.

With the approach of the 1981-82 school year, the tempo of criticism increased. Broad sides rained down on the Collegedale campus. Vance Ferrell's *Pilgrim Waymarks* printed a garbled version of minutes taken at the Atlanta Affirmation meetings, interrupted throughout with Ferrell's bracketed comments. In other issues of his publication, Ferrell described theological error at Southern College, citing, among other things, a speech by Knittel to the Association of SDA Secondary School Administrators on Ellen White and education. At the association's request, the speech was later printed in the *Journal of Education*, edited by the General Conference Department of Education.

The previously mentioned material gath-

ered by Woolcock and her student compatriots later appeared in an eight-page newspaper called *Collegedale Tidings*. It attacked several of the theology faculty, including the chairman, Douglas Bennett, who was accused of being a "Fordite" because he said it was the little horn, not the sins of the saints, that pollutes the heavenly sanctuary. Among many charges, Ed Zackrisson was reported to have said that anyone who experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was a pantheist, a version of what he said that he finds totally inaccurate. The *Collegedale Tidings* also reproduced the Vance Ferrell version of the Atlanta Affirmation minutes. Later, Ferrell, in turn, reprinted the Woolcock material in his *Pilgrim's Waymarks*.

“Those who are running down our church and doctrine should not be paid by our school . . . It would be better to have admitted Catholics teaching than to have wolves in sheep's clothing.”

—Sharon McKee

John Felts, who printed (but not edited) *Collegedale Tidings*, a one-time effort, prints and edits *SDA Press Release*, on newspaper-sized newsprint. Devoted initially (and still primarily) to disseminating news of the Davenport affair, Felts included in the fifth issue of his *Press Release* a call for Knittel to resign.

In the Spring of 1982, Robert Francis, who had been a popular theology teacher at Southern College before he retired in the Collegedale community, produced a 17-page document, "Some Observations on the Present Theology Crisis," that viewed with alarm what he considered to be a one-sided emphasis by some teachers in the Division of Religion on righteousness by faith.

At the Spring 1982 meeting of the Board of Trustees, a committee was established to attempt to deal fairly with complaints and criticism about faculty members. Many written communications were coming to the president of the college. Much of the time the letters were not signed and contained unsubstantiated charges. They revolved around three main areas: teaching concerning righteousness by faith versus perfection; the inspiration of Ellen White; and the concept of the heavenly sanctuary. The letters were vague and, in Knittel's view, contained not one line that documented the teaching of heresy. According to Knittel, McClure told him he also considered that no evidences of heresy had been presented.

Still on July 29, 1982, McClure called Knittel and said that he and J. Hinson Whitehead, treasurer of the Southern Union and secretary to the Southern College board, were coming to the campus and wanted to schedule meetings with several department chairmen and administrative officers. When the two men arrived, Knittel says that they asked him to work out a transfer of Edwin Zackrison to another Adventist school. Knittel reminded the men that Zackrison's education debt came to over \$60,000. McClure reportedly said the debt could be forgiven and Zackrison given one year's salary if another school were willing to take him. Then the chairman and secretary of the board left for their interviews with college personnel.

That same night at 11:30, Knittel was awakened to find a crowd of people at his front door. Incredulous, he heard the agitated faculty and staff members explain how McClure had questioned them about "the unrest on campus," and "Dr. Knittel's ability to 'pull things together.'" They asked Knittel what was happening. He didn't know.

On August 3, 1982, McClure summoned Knittel to the union office in Decatur, Georgia, about 150 miles from Southern College. There, McClure asked Knittel to take a job with Adventist Health Systems/Sunbelt. Knittel asked for an explanation for this request since he previously had not been confronted over any administrative problems. (In fact, in 1981 when Knittel had received inquiries about the possibility of becoming dean of the Kettering College of Medical Arts, McClure urged him not to pursue the opportunity.) Knittel says that McClure also indicated that Gladsen, Grant, and Zackrison had to go and that he told McClure he knew that the real problem with him as president was the fact that he refused to clean out the religion department. McClure, however, insists that the issue was one of administration.

Although Knittel told no one of McClure's request, when he called his wife back at Collegedale at 3 p.m., she had already heard from several sources that he had been asked to resign. By the time he arrived home at 5:30 p.m., he had phone calls to return from people all over the United States asking about the matter.

After thinking things over for a few days, Knittel wrote to McClure saying that, if there were further insistence on his resignation or dismissal just before the start of the 1982-83 school year, action would have to be taken by the full Board of Trustees in an official meeting. In response, McClure scheduled a board meeting for August 16.

However, McClure subsequently cancelled the meeting, reportedly because there was such an outcry from board members. On August 19, McClure came to a faculty meeting at Southern College. The opening of school was approaching and he appeared to want to reassure everyone. In his remarks he said, "I have no evidence of heresy being taught at Southern College." At another point he astonished the faculty by stating that "Dr. Knittel has not been asked to resign."

Less than a month later, at the September 15 board meeting, Knittel informed the board that he planned to ask for a sabbatical at the February 1983 board meeting. Knittel emphasized that board action would be improper before that 1983 meeting, since a formal plan of activity for such a proposal is required by the faculty working policy before a sabbatical request may be accepted.

Knittel also took advantage of the opportunity to deliver a forceful address on the problem as he saw it. He said in part:

“. . . some of the loudest voices have come from people who by their own admission are very hazy about theological issues. They simply have a vague and visceral feeling that somewhere along the line the traditional historic doctrines of the church have been perverted and/or lost in academia . . .

“I truly wonder whether our church is really ready for the type of critical thinking and independent study demanded by higher education.”

“Tom Zwemer resigned from the board in protest of what he saw as a purge mentality.”

He further expressed a plea for simple Christian ethics in dealing with fellow believers in times of controversy.

He called for a strong stand from church leaders against the “wretched invective appearing under the guise of purifying the church” from the underground press. While everyone claims to deplore these papers, Knittel pointed out that “church members and leaders continue to ask rather accusatory questions framed by statements that are word for word from the latest issue of *SDA Press Release*, et al.” Knittel cautioned against using wealth and influence to twist the arms and minds of church leaders.

Following his address, an executive session of the board of directors was declared, and those who were not part of that group, including Knittel, had to leave the room. Without much further discussion, McClure called for and received a vote accepting the president’s “request” with no strings attached.

After the September board meeting, board member Tom Zwemer, assistant dean of the School of Dentistry, Medical College of Georgia, submitted his resignation. He had served on the board about seven years and resigned in protest of what he saw as a “purge mentality” in operation.

In his letter, Zwemer summarized his perception of the events at Southern College as follows:

“The current crisis began in the open when Dr. Ford gave his paper on the Investigative Judgment at a Forum Meeting at PUC. College presidents were caught in the squeeze between scholars and church administrators.

“The rejection of the scholar’s version of the Statement of Fundamental beliefs at Dallas was the second principal issue. These two events lead to Glacier View and its consequence for all scholars.

“The series of editorials on ‘Colleges in Trouble,’ etc. in the *Adventist Review* closely followed. Walter Rea and Lewis Walton escalated the basic issues. The underground press then picked up the hue and cry. The Davenport problem became a critical issue and placed church administrators in the position of having to recapture their credibility as men of principle and action.

“Finally, the scholars’ retreat into obscurantism became the *prima facie* evidence which proved their heterodoxy to the conservative traditional constituency of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

“This series of events coupled with a remnant mentality dooms any college president who takes a stand for academic

freedom for his faculty within a sectarian institution. The better president the greater the risk.”

Not everyone was distressed by Knittel’s planned departure, however. When McClure had interviewed several administrative officers and faculty members in late July 1982, he reports that he found that the majority of those he talked to felt it was time for a change. Several expressed the view that Knittel had not tried to control the situation in the religion department, and through his neglect a small problem had grown into a large one. About the only thing that is certain at this time is that Knittel will take a sabbatical next year.

Individuals on both sides in the controversy over Southern College seem sincerely committed to the church and gravely con-

cerned about its future. Church leaders want desperately to recapture the image of Southern College as a loyal, traditional Adventist school. Teachers in the religion department consider continuous searching for truth a basic Christian responsibility. Events at Southern College over the coming months will answer the question of whether it is possible for people who think differently, but share the same ultimate goals, to accept each other as brothers and sisters.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *We approached an equal number of persons from each viewpoint. Critics of Knittel and the school were willing to speak, but not for attribution. One critic refused to be interviewed at all.*