
Inside the Weimar Institute

by Suzanne Schüppel-Frey

At the same time that Adventist colleges are struggling to maintain budgets and student enrollments, an alternative higher educational system is growing within the denomination. Three self-supporting, non-accredited colleges now operate in addition to the nine run by the church. Hartland Health and Education Institute in Virginia attracted 10 students for its first quarter, Autumn 1983. Black Hills Missionary College in South Dakota enrolled six students this fall. In its sixth year of operation, Weimar Institute's college has 117 students. During its existence, 22 students have graduated.

Situated at 2,250 feet elevation, the Weimar property includes 400 acres of pine trees and meadows in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains 45 miles northeast of Sacramento, California. It is 130 miles from Pacific Union College. Commonly referred to as a "School of Discipleship," the institute started as a double-phased Adventist ministry: a college and a health center. Later an academy was added. A 21-person board of directors appoints administrators and is responsible for the operation. The institute is owned by a group of lay Adventists.

Whether the interpretation of "self-supporting" is old or new, a self-supporting institution emphasizes a lifestyle that requires staff and students alike to sacrifice their self-interest in favor of the organization and its mission. At Weimar, not only staff, but students talk about the lifestyle required for good physical and spiritual health. "Soul winning is not an activity, it is a lifestyle," says Steve Thulon, a senior religion major who chose to attend Weimar because he says it provides an openminded atmosphere, committed to spiritual growth. "Everybody here loves God. God's character is represented in the people here."

Weimar's lifestyle has attracted nearly as many staff members as it has students. Steve Van Cleave, a registered nurse who worked in the Weimar Health Center three years ago, said he went to Weimar because it represented a compromise between the mainstream church and self-supporting institutions that were too conservative for his taste. "I believed in Ellen White's inspiration and wanted to improve as a Christian. I was looking for a community and wanted to be around people who I thought would be closer to what I was striving for." The lifestyle also drives people away. Van Cleave said he left totally disillusioned because questions about any aspect of the lifestyle and theology were not tolerated.

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From its beginning, Weimar has also created controversy within Adventist higher education—its mere existence insinuates that the denomination's schools are not following Ellen White correctly and therefore other colleges are needed. The idea to start Weimar grew out of a series of retreats and study groups in Northern and Central California in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Centered at Pacific Union College, Adventist ministers, educators, and laypeople studied principles of Christian education in the Bible and in Ellen White's writings. Dick Winn, then youth pastor at Pacific Union College, was the dominant leader. The movement was disenchanted with the present denominational educational system and advocated a return to the "blueprint of Adventism," particularly regarding theology and lifestyle.

"They wanted to create an alternative that definitely would reform the system," said John Wohlfeil, a former staffmember at Weimar who attended some of the retreats. They considered another college "much needed." So when the Weimar sanitarium property with its 38 beige-colored buildings became available in 1977, Winn and the others saw it as an opportunity to fulfill their cherished dream. A special prayer meeting was called at the Carmichael SDA Church. Seventy people gathered to seek the will of God in this decision. Immediately after the prayers, each person was asked to indicate on a secret ballot what he or she saw as being God's plan. All 70 ballots were affirmatively marked. The papers were signed the next day.

"After careful consultation with members of the General Conference and others, we decided to remain officially and legally independent of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," says Weimar President Bob Fillman, a former English teacher in a public junior college. "This way, we would not be a financial burden to the church. We would have more freedom to experiment and try programs that differ from the established Adventist schools, and if our program failed,

we would not be an embarrassment for the church. We have been very concerned not to have staff members or programs here that in any way criticize the church or its institutions."

To those who suggest that education is the only legitimate function for a college, Weimar's academic offerings might seem limited. It offers bachelor degrees in only five areas: health education, health science, religion, elementary education, and agriculture. It is not accredited by the church or other accrediting bodies. According to Paul Hawks, director of personnel and public relations, the reason for not seeking accreditation was that "the leadership did not want to change any aspect of the program to please an accrediting body. To best serve the church and God's work, we don't want anyone dictating how the program should be run." He also noted that seeking accreditation takes too much time and effort.

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Weimar has made transfer agreements with other denominational schools, but when students transfer from Weimar to other colleges they discover what the non-accreditation of Weimar means. Some Adventist colleges, such as Andrews University or Pacific Union College, require students to validate their Weimar work by a trial quarter. If their academic performance proves satisfactory, Weimar credits, applicable to their major, are accepted. Other schools, like Walla Walla College, require that students from non-accredited schools take equivalency examinations before their credits are evaluated.

To students who go to Weimar in search of a particular Christian experience, rather than just an education, the transferability of

credit does not seem to matter. Ray Glendrange went from Weimar to Loma Linda University. In November 1980, his comments on the transfer process were printed in the *Weimar Bulletin*. Saying his Weimar experience would have been worth losing all his credits for, he cheerfully discovered "almost all my credits from Weimar College were transferable. I only needed some summer school work to be classified as a junior."

Maurice Hodgen, dean of the graduate school at Loma Linda University, says stu-

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dents from Weimar applying to his school's programs would be treated just like students from other non-accredited schools such as those from outside the United States. They would be required to take some coursework from an accredited school before Weimar credits would be accepted.

Weimar's curriculum was outlined in January 1978 by an advisory council of 18 educators. Classes are balanced with required work and outreach programs, which are considered general education and therefore given academic credit. On Wednesdays students have no classes or work assignments. They participate in various service-related activities in nearby communities, visiting the elderly in nursing homes, helping in institutions for mentally retarded people and in youth rehabilitation centers.

The goal, according to the college catalogue, is that before students leave Weimar, "they will have been responsible—as a team or as an individual—for having brought someone to Christ." According to Chaplain Dick Winn, 15 people have been baptized as a result of the outreach program.

For the work program, all students must spend 156 hours per quarter (15 hours per week) in one of the campus industries: the cafeteria, bakery, library, welding shop, or auto shop. After having spent their first two years changing work assignments each quarter, juniors and seniors are expected to select and become proficient in one particular field. Students do not receive wages for their labor, since they do earn two units of credit for it each quarter. But the work is regarded as payment for room and board and helps keep tuition costs down.

Students are not the only ones who must work at maintaining the property. Every staff member, from Fillman on down, is required to do his share of manual labor. On Wednesdays administrators and office workers clean the campus. Others, like Hawks, do kitchen chores. For one week of every month, he washes dishes with students once a day. The purpose is teamwork. "You develop a bond, a sense of togetherness," Hawks says.

Chaplain Winn has defined much of the Weimar philosophy through his regular column in the Institute's newsletter, *The Weimar Bulletin*. He sees the "Great Controversy Principle" as placing the responsibility of representing God to the rest of the world on his people. In his view, Christ's substitutionary death is less important than the symbolic event of the cross, which proved God's goodness and fairness. The effect this has on believers is that they "are not concerned with anxious endeavors to get God to think well of them, but rather they respond in an unburdened way to God's loving endeavors to get people to think well of him."

John Wohlfeil, formerly the chaplain at the Weimar Health Center and now the associate pastor of the Anaheim Adventist Church, says of Weimar, "The whole emphasis is on what God is doing through his people and on the fact that we get to represent his character. The point is that people are able to vindicate God's character, and Jesus Christ can't come back until his people

reflect his goodness. Weimar is set up to be a center where this is happening, and where people are trained to go out and develop this theme within the Adventist church structure.

“It seems that the emphasis is on us, rather than on the cross and what Christ is doing for us. But people at Weimar definitely do not want to be associated with perfectionism. This view has a new, more pleasing appeal, but it really is the same old thing. If there is one word to describe Weimar, it is subtle.”

Winn, however, says, “We don’t want to give the impression that healthful living or any human works contribute to our standing with God . . . or relate to earning our salvation. But our confidence in God leads to intelligent obedience.”

Van Cleave has a different impression. “When I was at Weimar (June 1979 to May 1980), a lot of people were into perfectionism. But they did not use perfectionist language, they used grace language, righteousness-by-faith words. The basic thing was, ‘I want to be here and I want to be good so I can get to heaven.’ People’s choices and actions spoke louder than their words.”

Although many at Weimar were very caring and concerned about helping others, Van Cleave says, “They seemed primarily concerned about their own salvation. Constantly, discussions would end on the topic of people’s standing with God—whether or

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not they applied Desmond Ford’s or Ellen White’s language to that problem. And people had a way of describing their conversion experiences in terms of giving up certain behaviors. Rarely did you hear about God’s grace.”

In addition to the college, Weimar runs a live-in health program called Newstart where patients come to be treated for degenerative diseases such as arteriosclerosis, diabetes, or arthritis. Ellen White’s eight natural remedies—nutrition, exercise, water, sunlight, temperance, self-control, air, and rest—are used in teaching patients how to live healthier lives. The health center has a staff of three full-time physicians, six nurses, a physical therapist, and a dietitian, among others. A 25-day Newstart session costs \$3,000. Usually 15–20 people enroll per session and 11 sessions are held during the year.

Diet plays an important role in Weimar’s program, both with patients at the health center and in outreach programs featuring cooking schools. Weimar recipe books and the cafeteria offer a diet based on fruits, grains, nuts, and vegetables. Foods are prepared entirely without animal products, except for milk. No oils or sugar and little salt or spices are used. The strictness of the diet does not always agree with staff and students. Nurse Van Cleave recalled “heated committee meetings” about whether to use milk. “If you compromised with your health at Weimar, it indicated a character deficiency that you should at least work on,” he said. “Once a student told me, ‘I’m going to eat pizza in town this afternoon, and I don’t care about the consequences.’”

Financially, Weimar is supported by income from the Newstart program and other campus industries, tuition, and contributions. Staff members also aid the organization by accepting minimal wages. The first year of Weimar’s existence, workers earned a \$10 weekly salary plus board and room, since the institute generated no income of its own.

After the first year, a salary schedule was devised that does not pay according to educational degrees or experience, but the

amount of responsibility a person carries. The pay scale falls into four categories: administrators and board-appointed staff receive \$394 per month, physicians and those heading a department get \$366, teachers and nurses are paid \$336, and people doing traditional labor and service-oriented jobs earn \$305, according to Business Manager Bob Puelz. Winn says, "This is only 60 percent of our ideal salary."

The financial class distinction between the president and a gardener is \$92 per month, Puelz pointed out. According to this approach, "students are in a sense paid more than administrators. Whereas I earn \$2.50 an hour, students get \$2.81 per hour, if their work were to be converted into cash value," he said.

The staff does receive compensatory benefits. Non-working spouses with children under age 10 get a monthly dependency allowance of \$110. Free housing and utilities, educational benefits for children, and discount prices on cafeteria meals are also provided. "Of course, the higher you were on the hierarchical ladder, the better housing facilities you would get," Van Cleave commented.

Weimar is able to interest workers despite the low wages, but according to Wohlfeil, who stayed two and a half years, Weimar seems to have an unusually large turnover. There are 85 staff members this year, many of them new. Except for top administrators, the average person stays only six months to a year.

Even some of the top administrators have gone. George Chen, chief physician in charge of medical personnel during the first three years of Weimar's existence, left in 1980, "for financial and theological reasons," according to his wife Irma. She explained the turnover at Weimar in these terms: "If you didn't live up to the expectations of others, you got fired. If others didn't live up to your expectations, you would leave." She said she and her family left because they were not able to support Weimar 100 percent anymore.

In the May 1983 issue of *Weimar Bulletin*, Fillman addressed the staff turnover question: "We are experiencing considerably more changes than usual. In addition to the four families who joined the Hartland Institute, four other families accepted General Conference calls for missionary service overseas, three families returned to different areas of denominational employment, and two families planned to join lay operated health organizations in Britain. This accounts for almost all the changes."

The Hartland Institute he mentioned is being headed by Weimar's former dean of the college, Colin Standish. He left in July for Hartland's 575-acre plantation 80 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. Although Hartland will be patterned very closely after Weimar in its curriculum and health ministry, the two institutions remain independent of each other and have different boards of directors.

Those operations sometimes compare themselves to Madison Institute, which spawned 40 other self-supporting institutions during its history. From 1904 to 1963, the Nashville Agricultural Normal Institute Corporation owned and operated an academy, college, sanitarium-hospital, food factory, and farm of more than 800 acres.

Madison College was created to provide missionary training through a work-study program, just like Weimar. However, ownership of Madison was transferred to the Adventist Church in April 1983, and, following financial difficulties, it closed in September 1964.

The future of Weimar, Hartland, and Black Hills Missionary College will depend on how long faculty and students continue to be willing to spend periods of their life in a simple, even sacrificial life style. Meanwhile, many educational leaders in the church will try to ignore these colleges, feeling the existence of these schools in a sense condemns the church. These leaders will continue to feel unable to speak out because of the subtlety with which these colleges market their holiness.