



Oakwood College draws 10 percent of all black American Adventists to its 100th Anniversary Celebration. Atlantic Union College determines that 400 full-time students will keep the college open.

25,000 Descend on Oakwood for The Mother of Alumni Weekends

by Henry Felder

My wife, Clara, and I arrived at the Von Braun Civic Center auditorium at 7:45 a.m. on Sabbath morning, April 6, 1996—the earliest I had ever arrived for church. The doors opened at 8:00 a.m. Soon, all 10,000 seats of the auditorium were filled. Before the Sabbath morning services concluded—seven hours after the doors opened—more than 20,000 people had inhabited every conceivable part of the center's main hall, concert hall, exhibition halls, and walkways. According to the Visitors and Convention Bureau, more than 25,000 people—10 percent of the black Adventist membership in North America—gathered in Huntsville, Alabama, for the alumni reunion of the 100th anniversary of Oakwood College.

Probably the most elaborate alumni meeting ever hosted by an Adventist college, the celebration was described by Alfred McClure, president of the North American Division and chair of the Oakwood College board, as the largest gathering of Seventh-day Adventists in North America. Wave after wave of speakers and musicians brought the consummate greetings, sang or

played the ultimate songs, prayed the definitive prayers, and collected an all-time offering. The gathering, which seemed to last for eons, culminated in a powerful sermon on the dangers of materialism by Walter Pearson, associate secretary of the General Conference Ministerial Association.

The weekend officially started Thursday night at the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) banquet. More than 1,700 persons listened to the musical group *Take 6* and heard William H. Gray III (former member, U.S. House of Representatives and now president of the UNCF) expound on the continued need for black colleges. Friday was devoted to lectures for medical personnel, campus tours, book signings, and spending thousands shopping at the local mall.

Friday night, more than 6,000 people thrilled to the message of Capt. Barry Black, chief chaplain for the U.S. Navy Atlantic Fleet. Sunday's events, on the Oakwood campus, included an exhibit area providing a cornucopia of books by and about blacks, CDs and other forms of music, and the ever-present t-shirts. It was a casual time—a time for greeting friends and catching up on changes in jobs, spouses, and locations. "What type of work are you doing?" or "Where are you living now?" were far better openings than "Who's your spouse this year?"

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For me, the time at Oakwood this spring was filled with nostalgia of a type seldom understood by today's collegians. In the early '60s, when I attended and graduated from Oakwood, Huntsville was a relatively benign Southern city whose federal government presence at the sophisticated Marshall Space Flight Center¹ helped take some of the edge off the raw elements of "Southern hospitality" toward blacks. In those days it would have been inconceivable that every hotel room in Huntsville and the surrounding 30 miles would have been reserved months in advance for an Oakwood College event. Until my senior year, blacks could not stay in the downtown hotels, nor attend the local white Adventist church. The modern civil-rights movement was in its nascent stage and the ugliness surrounding Selma and Birmingham, Alabama, had not reached the Oakwood campus.

This spring, I wandered the campus, peeked into a few classrooms, and reminisced over the time when I was the skinny kid trying to master chemistry and mathematics, and court Clara, all at the same time. Then there was a brief reunion with two roommates not seen for more than 30 years, one of whom, as director of space medicine for the Air Force, makes sure astronauts remain healthy.

Even after dozens of trips back to Oakwood and attendance at many alumni gatherings, this one was special for me. The sense of how far Oakwood has come in achieving its status as a major player in the education of Adventist youth was present throughout the weekend. The Oakwood Centennial Homecoming marked the coming-out celebration of a black Adventist community that was ready to "strut its stuff."

How do we explain the development of Oakwood from 16 students at its opening on November

16, 1896, to an alumni reunion that brought 10 percent of the entire black Adventist membership in North America back to the campus for a single weekend celebration? Oakwood College has always been the crown jewel of the black Adventist community. Founded near the turn of the century to provide religious and industrial training to black Adventists of the South,² Oakwood moved to an academic focus with the student revolt of 1931. The student action directly led to the demise of industrial and vocational training, the appointment of the first black president of Oakwood, and, ultimately, full accreditation as a four-year college in 1958.³ The religious emphasis is a strong reason for the great sense of mission that continues to be one of the hallmarks of Oakwood graduates. The vast majority of black Adventist ministers received some or all of their training at Oakwood. Great preachers and evangelists such as C. E. Mosley, E. E. Cleveland, C. D. Brooks, and Charles Bradford, all were products of Oakwood. Under these preachers, blacks in the Adventist Church grew, as of 1994, from less than 10 percent of the North American Division to 25 percent.⁴

Oakwood has provided a nurturing environment and a sense of family for countless students who went through the "Oakwood Experience"—a sense of family and caring that was perhaps most responsible for 25,000 people returning this year to Huntsville. The "Mecca" that has married its children, produced its prestigious pastors, helped spread the gospel to all parts of the world, and spawned thousands of professionals in all occupations and industries has a strong attraction for today's black youth. With more than 1,600 students, Oakwood is now one of the largest of the Adventist colleges. According to G. Ralph Thompson, secretary of the

General Conference, Oakwood is also one of the most financially sound. The danger of materialism, of which Walter Pearson spoke, was relevant because it was finally possible. With tithe and offerings in excess of \$100 million in 1994,⁵ and church membership in excess of 25 percent of the North American Division total,⁶ black Adventists have indeed come a long way.

In addition to celebrating with alumni and friends, I went to Oakwood to recruit for the M.B.A. program at La Sierra University. The "Oakwood Experience" has helped shape my life, but there are other experiences that beckon to black Adventist youth. The need for diversity in their college careers, location, and their own tastes have moved many black Adventist youth to choose other Adventist colleges and universities in North America. However, as I seek more black students for La Sierra, I will always remember that magical centennial alumni weekend at Oakwood.

1. Von Braun Complex is named after Wernher von Braun, the German rocket scientist who, in 1945, brought his talents and rocket team to play for the winning side of the 1940s cataclysm.

2. Garland Millet, "Spiritual Life at Oakwood," *Adventist Heritage* 17:1 (March 1996), pp. 14-17. This issue of *Adventist Heritage* is a special Oakwood edition containing numerous articles about the history and status of Oakwood. You will want to read the history of Ellen White's visions for Oakwood and the role her son, J. E. White, played in its early development.

3. Zeola B. Allston and C. J. Barnes, "The Student Strike of 1931," *Adventist Heritage*, op. cit., pp. 30-32.

4. Author's summary of data from the *Annual Statistical Report of the General Conference*. See, for example, the statistical reports for the years 1965 and 1994.

5. Black Adventists in the North American Division now provide ap-

proximately 11 percent of the \$804 million tithes collected in the entire Adventist Church.

6. Data compiled from the 132nd

Annual Statistical Report of the General Conference, and from unpublished tables from the Office of Human Relations of the North American Division.

Atlantic Union College Survives With 400 Students, \$9 Million Debt

As of May 31, James Londis' tenure as president of Atlantic Union College ended, but the college remains open for business. It owes at least \$6.5 million to the Atlantic Union and \$2 million to the Southern New England and New York conferences. The school is operating under a budget that has reduced salaries of faculty by 17 percent during the summer of 1996. If the financial equivalent of 400 full-time students enrolls in the fall, AUC can add a few classes, retain its faculty and staff, and pay them retroactively for their reduced summer wages.

N. Clifford Sorenson, the former president of Walla Walla and Columbia Union colleges, and chair of Management and Professional Studies at AUC, is president *pro tem*. His administration reports that applications for the next year are up from this time in 1995.

Meanwhile, a search committee continues its work to find a new president. Its task may have been

complicated by the inability of the Atlantic Union constituency to establish a quorum on June 2, and the need for the union constituency to reconvene in November to elect or re-elect a president of the union, who also serves as chair of the Atlantic Union College board.

January 1994—Londis Becomes President

James Londis points to several reasons for the decline in enrollment (see Figure 1). Servicing what Alfred McClure, North American Division president, later described as a "monstrously" large debt—about \$4 million when Londis became president in January of 1994—kept the school from investing in adequate recruitment, including a professional enrollment management director. The debt made it difficult to continue offering scholarships to high-performing students, and nearly impossible to continue the high cost of maintaining the

historic buildings that distinguish Atlantic Union College among Adventist colleges (see Figure 2).

Life-style issues, such as the appearance of some jewelry, were another impediment to maintaining support from pastors and parents. At a time when most other Adventist colleges in North America were coming to terms with changes in student life-styles, AUC was increasingly urged to tighten up standards and police them more strictly.

Finally, many parents worried about exposing their children to students from various cultures. More than two-thirds of college-age students in the Atlantic Union attend college at other Adventist schools—schools that are culturally homogenous. Twenty-eight percent of these students attend Oakwood (almost exclusively African-American students); 22 percent attend Andrews (primarily students from Northern New England and up-state New York); and 13 percent attend Southern (primarily Latin American students) (see Figure 3).

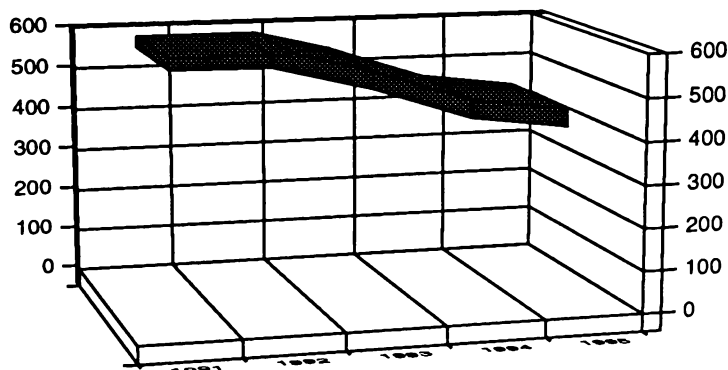
First Semester 1995—Vice-Presidents Resign

During the first semester of last school year (1995-1996), disagreements surfaced among college administrators. Some differences related to Adventist education in general, some more specifically to the new academic program AUC adopted in 1994, particularly how to teach the interdisciplinary "faith and learning" classes. For these and other reasons, three vice-presidents resigned during the first semester: Carol Allen, academic affairs; David Rawson, financial administration; and Ciro Sepulveda, student services. The three established Academic Paradigms Online, a firm specializing in electronic distance learning.

By December 1, 1995, Londis had found replacements for the

Figure 1

1991-1995 Enrollment—Financial Full-Time Equivalents



departing vice-presidents. By the end of the month, meetings with Andrews officials led to an agreement signed by administrators of both schools to continue discussions about the possibility of a merger. It was agreed that a proposal to merge the schools would be taken to both college boards, and then to the constituencies of each school.

At the end of the first semester of the 1995-1996 school year, Atlantic Union College was more than \$6 million in debt, and it was rumored that it would be able to meet its payroll only through March 1996. College officers secured \$2 million from the New York and Southern New England conference revolving funds to meet the school's payroll and finance general operations.

February 18, 1996— Board Approves Merger

The college board met February 18 and voted unanimously to recommend merger with Andrews University. Some faculty and students, committed to multiculturalism, expressed concern that AUC would become homogenized into a mid-American campus with a mid-American world view. An "Alternative Committee" gained energy, with Development Director Lisa Wheeler, 1970 AUC alumnus Will Kitching, and other college-related persons, redrafting college fundraising plans. They asked to present an "alternative proposal" to the upcoming college constituency meeting.

March 10—College Constituency Meeting

At the March 10 meeting of the Atlantic Union College constituency, many lay members urged that AUC remain independent. One woman demanded that Andrews president Niels-Erik Andreasen re-

main at his podium, while she proceeded to grill him. Other constituents wept. Alfred McClure, president of the North American Division, and James Londis, president of AUC, spoke pointedly of the need to continue discussions with Andrews. Toward the end of the 10 and one-half hour meeting, Stennett Brooks, president of the Northeastern Conference, the union's regional conference, representing a majority of the union's members, rose to speak. He stated, among other things, his fear that minority representation would be blamed for the failure of the college if the future of the school was not ensured one way or another. He then counseled the assembly to consider attorney Glenn Coe's early motion to study both independence and merger with Andrews. After Brooks' speech, the union constituency voted two-to-one to adopt parallel tracks.

On Monday, March 11, the day after the college's constituency meeting, Niels-Erik Andreasen faxed Jim Londis a letter putting the Andrews merger proposal "in abeyance." By default, the college was left with only one option: to find a way to relieve itself of debt, construct a balanced budget, and exist entirely on its own. By the end of the month, Londis announced his resignation from the presidency of

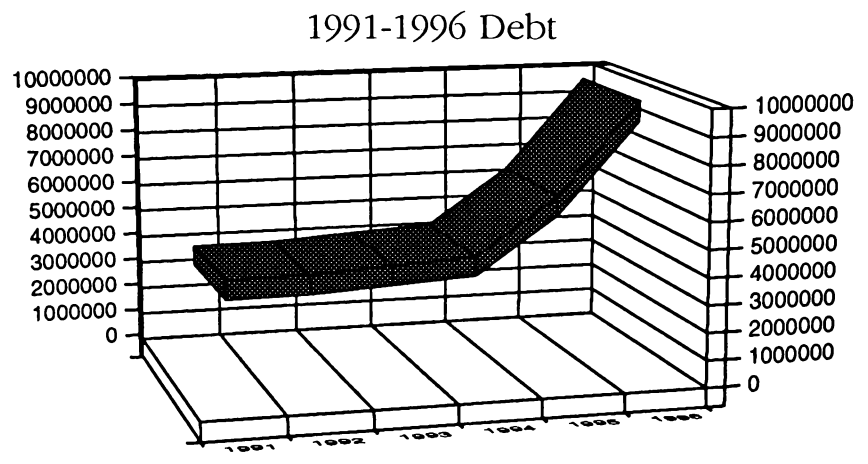
the college, effective May 31. Without his permission, Londis' letter of resignation to the board, citing as the basis of his decision lack of board support and a differing vision for the future of the college from that of some trustees, was released to the press.

Londis and college administrators continued to work on financial plans that would allow the institution to survive through the 1996-1997 school year. Forty staff members were informed that their employment would end May 31. A budget with a 17 percent reduction in salary for faculty and remaining staff was announced. The financial equivalent of 400 full-time students in the fall of 1996 would make possible retroactive payment of reduced summer wages and the normal operation of the college.

March 31—Atlantic Union Constituency Meeting

A special Atlantic Union Conference constituency was convened March 31. The Londis administration presented the revised budget. Alfred McClure and Richard Osborn, from the North American Division, counseled delegates to remember that "with ownership comes responsibility." Some con-

Figure 2



ferences spoke about the need for good stewardship, and questioned making further investments in the college. Others cited God's punishment for not operating the college according to His will—they suggested repentance as the first step in the recovery of the college.

McClure suggested that whatever shortfalls might come from operating the college during the next school year, local conferences within the union should take financial responsibility, proportionately to the size of their membership. But a motion to that effect was soundly voted down, with the Northeastern Conference delegates voting almost as a block against the motion. The conference has subsequently refused to join other local conferences in lending money to the college. The Northeastern Conference, with 60 percent of the

union's membership, is already \$5.1 million in arrears in tithe payments to the union, according to the official report of the General Conference auditing service. The delegates did vote to: (1) keep the college open, assuming the "risks and challenges" of doing so; (2) commit to raising \$1 million annually to compensate for the reduction in union subsidy that resulted from the union's taking responsibility for the \$9 million college debt; and (3) continue to explore affiliations with other Adventist schools.

June 2—Atlantic Union Constituency Meeting

Now, attention shifted to another, regularly scheduled Atlantic Union Conference constituency meeting, set for June 2, in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. All

the union officials were up for election or re-election, including the president of the Atlantic Union Conference, Theodore T. Jones, who serves as chair of the AUC board.

However, before the business meeting got under way, Glenn Coe, an attorney in Connecticut and parliamentarian for the union constituency session, pointed out the need to scrutinize the quorum. By Atlantic Union by-laws, a quorum requires half the delegates to be lay people, and half of those lay people to be women. Although most conferences were close to compliance and could have adjusted their delegations, of the 157 delegates from the Northeastern Conference, 110 were on the conference payroll. Northeastern officials suggested that the constitution be disregarded, the meeting convene, and then the constituency could change its constitution. After some discussion between the parliamentarian and incumbent union officers, it was determined that the June 2 union constituency was simply not constituted in a way that could conduct business.

With this decision, Stennett Brooks announced his delegation's refusal to participate under present by-laws. It had been a mistake to vote for that kind of delegate representation in 1991, and now, "as Malcolm X said, 'the chickens have come home to roost.'" The June 2 Atlantic Union Conference constituency meeting dissolved without carrying out any business.

Another meeting of the Atlantic Union constituency has been scheduled for the early part of November.

Figure 3

Atlantic Union Students at AUC and Other SDA Schools

