

# A New Era of Ellen G. White Studies?

*By Douglas Morgan*

**T**he First International Conference on Ellen G. White and SDA History may well serve to mark an era in the ongoing history of the role of Ellen G. White and her writings. However, it will require the clarity of hindsight or someone with greater insight on current developments than this observer has to characterize that era concisely and to summarize clearly just how the conference reflected it.

If one were to ask, Was the conference . . . (a) based on conservative assumptions about Ellen G. White's role and authority; (b) conducted in an irenic and open spirit; (c) oriented more toward building faith than debating divisive historical and theological issues; (d) devoted more to the practical and pastoral concerns involved in the participants' professional responsibilities than to theoretical questions; or, (e) marked by advances in scholarship; the answer would have to be . . . all of the above

The event, funded by the General Conference on the recommendation of the White Estate and organized in conjunction with Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary faculty, brought representatives from around the world to the Historic Adventist Village in Battle Creek, Michigan, May 15-19, 2002. It was not a typical scholarly conference, though a number of scholars did attend and present papers. It did not focus on a particular theme or issue, though some topics stood out for frequent recurrence. It was not mainly organized to defend the authority of Ellen G. White from some great challenge, though considerable attention was given to concerns about authority and countering misinformation from antagonists.

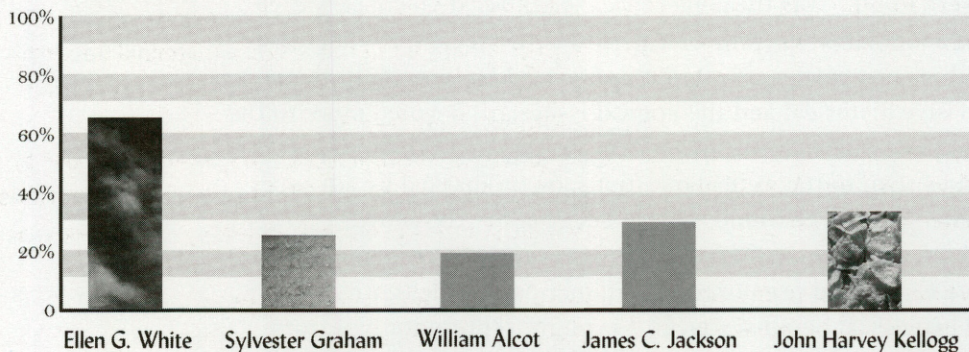
Nor was it precisely a conference for an identifiable profession, but that may be the most nearly accurate description because it was intended mainly for those who hold church positions specifically concerned with passing on the heritage of Ellen G. White: college teachers of Adventist history and "prophetic guidance," personnel from the several branch research centers of the White Estate, and "spirit of prophecy" coordinators from various world divisions.



Denis Fortin, associate dean of the Seminary, who coordinated the conference along with fellow seminary professor Jerry Moon, and James Nix, director of the White Estate, described four objectives for the gathering: (a) to “strengthen faith in Ellen White’s spiritual gift and understanding of her role” in the church; (b) to “facilitate networking” among the participants; (c) to “create a forum for discussion of difficult issues;” and (d) to discuss how to “present Ellen White to young people” most effectively.

Of the 65 participants, 40 percent came from outside North America. The General Conference funded the participation of one college educator and one additional representative appointed from each world division. For North America, expenses were also paid for one teacher from each college and university.

### Health and Medical Statement Accuracy



The number of women participants—I counted six—seemed sparse, especially for a conference focused on a female prophet.

The speakers and themes that marked the plenary session pointed toward a conservative general framework for the conference. The setting itself, a replica of the meetinghouse constructed by the Adventist pioneers in 1857, evoked an aura of sacred history, augmented by inspirational stories and testimonials.

In his plenary address on May 16, Alberto Timm issued a trenchant, programmatic call for defending the authority of Ellen G. White against current threats. Director of the Brazilian Ellen G. White Research Center, Timm characterized the current era of challenges to Ellen G. White’s role as a “globalization of

criticism” in which attacks from the past led by Dudley M. Canright and later from Adventist academic circles in the 1970s and 1980s have been repackaged and made easily accessible throughout the world on antagonistic Web sites. Additionally, dissidents in the independent ministries on the right have in some instances jumped ahead of the Church in spreading unauthorized translations and publications in various regions.

All of this comes at a time when the Church is rapidly adding millions of new members, often with minimal indoctrination, who are particularly susceptible to distorted information on Ellen G. White. Timm urged that the Church meet this challenge head on, calling for effective evaluation of “the overall profile and commitment to Ellen G. White’s writings of the professors of the theological seminaries and schools of

pastoral training.” In addition, he recommended adoption of “more effective strategies for building the faith of thousands of new converts who are added daily,” such as subsidizing low-cost translations to impoverished, developing countries and better utilization of technology.

Other plenary session speakers included Herbert E. Douglass, author of the recently published *Messenger of the Lord*, and Don Schneider, president of the North American Division. Douglass, whose book has been acclaimed for its comprehensiveness and high standard of scholarship, passionately contended for Ellen G. White as a normative theologian. The “great controversy theme,” Douglass argued, integrates Mrs. White’s writings into the most credible and satisfying system of Christian theology ever produced, in which “the doctrinal divisions that have troubled the Church for forty years dissolve like Jell-O on a hot July day.”

During the Sabbath morning worship hour, Schneider exhorted Adventist educators that their highest priority should be their students’ relationship



with Jesus. "The Seventh-day Adventist Church has not a dime to spend on a teacher who isn't leading students to Jesus," declared the North American Division president. It was a fitting capstone to a conference in which participants devoted a major portion of their energies to seeking ways to build faith in the ministry of Ellen G. White and the Adventist Church as means to spiritual health and salvation.

If the conference took traditional affirmations concerning Ellen G. White's role and authority as essentially fixed foundations and placed emphasis on strategies for building commitment to those affirmations, it also welcomed diverse viewpoints and advances in understanding based on fair-minded critical scholarship. Alden Thompson of Walla Walla College, not generally perceived as a bulwark of conservatism, took a prominent role. In addition to giving the Friday morning devotional talk, "My Pilgrimage with Ellen G. White," Thompson utilized his models of inspiration in a presentation on "Taking the Fear Out of Ellen White Studies," given in one of the four "breakout" sections from which participants could choose in morning and afternoon sessions.

Two of the more noteworthy examples of research findings came during those breakout sessions. Australian physician Don McMahon reported on his in-depth analysis of the assertions of nineteenth-century health reformers, including Ellen G. White, measured in terms of their congruity with current consensus on medical knowledge. No one seemed unduly perturbed by McMahon's conclusion that only 66 percent of Ellen G. White's health and medical statements in her book *Ministry of Healing* would be deemed accurate by modern standards (considerable slippage from the 100 percent PAQ—"prophetic accuracy quotient"—touted some 25 years ago by Rene Noorbergen in *Prophet of Destiny*). The relative serenity can probably be attributed in large measure to the fact that other and more famous health reformers of the era fared far worse—Sylvester Graham (29 percent), William Alcott (27 percent), James C. Jackson (34 percent), and John Harvey Kellogg (37 percent).

Craig Newborn of the Oakwood College branch office of the White Estate addressed the racial identity of Ellen G. White's ancestors—a topic that has generated considerable discussion in the past few

## Alberto Timm issued a trenchant, programmatic call for defending the authority of Ellen G. White against current threats.



years. Newborn presented a fascinating close-up look at almost a century of investigation and interchange on this issue, and then concluded with late-breaking news. Only a week prior to the conference, the White Estate had received a report it had commissioned from an impressively credentialed genealogist that appears to establish decisively that there is no connection between the Gould family of Ellen's maternal ancestry and the Goulds of mixed racial heritage who settled in Gouldtown, New Jersey.

On the whole, though, concerns about how best to communicate and nurture faith in received conceptions of Ellen G. White's prophetic ministry overshadowed efforts to push the boundaries of historical understanding of her career and conceptualization of the role and function of her prophetic gift.

In a nutshell, this conference gave greater emphasis, for example, to exploration of methods for using the Internet more effectively than to the substance of what should be posted on the Internet. Even here, time was only sufficient to begin the conversation. Most participants, I think it safe to say, would welcome further opportunity for the kind of fruitful interchange on a broad agenda that was initiated at the Battle Creek Conference of 2002.

Douglas Morgan chairs the History and Political Science Department at Columbia Union College.