



The Dangers of Talking about Sex

By Ezrela Cheah

In the small world of Adventism, everything comes full circle. It was a risk management lecture by consulting Adventist attorney Phil Hiroshima about the devastating effects of sexual abuse on minors that prompted Michael Weston to file suit against Monterey Bay Academy (MBA) for what happened to him when he was a student there in the 1980s.

Now Hiroshima is defending the school in litigation that has five plaintiffs and that stunned alumni and the school when filed on December 31, 2003. The filing date is significant because the suit takes advantage of a little-known California law that lifted the statute of limitations on sexual abuse lawsuits only during the year 2003. The law was passed in 2002 during the height of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse crisis.

In addition to MBA, two former teachers, Ronald Wittlake and Lowell Nelson, were named in the suit. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* ran a story about the case on January 11, 2004. Four days later, Ronald Wittlake was found dead in his home, having shot himself in the chest.

The five alumni—John Juarez, Kendall Dealy, Michael Weston,

Reinhold Tilstra, and Vince P.—allege that during their time at the school in the 1980s, they were sexually abused. Joseph P. Scully, the lawyer representing the five, reports: "I heard an amazing tale of Adventist teachers nude sunbathing with boys on a sundeck, drugs and alcohol provided by teachers in the dormitory, and sexual abuse and sexual assault."

Hiroshima admits that the allegations are serious if the events actually took place and says that the Church wants to get to the bottom of what happened. He says the administration of MBA was unaware of the events taking place, and dealing with events of twenty years ago makes it difficult to get accurate information.

Settlement talks are underway in the case. Should they fail, the case will be tried in court this summer.

Prior to his suicide at age fifty, Wittlake had worked for Lancaster, California, High School, teaching special education independent studies. Having graduated from MBA, he returned to teach music there from 1981 to 1989.

Scot Mathis, who attended from 1984 to 1986, reports having a positive experience during that time. "Mr. Wittlake was younger than most of the faculty, and related well to the students. He was sometimes enlisted as an advocate when someone had gotten in trouble. After I

left MBA, a friend who was still attending told me that Wittlake had supplied him with alcohol."

Feelings among many of the alumni regarding the accusations leveled against Lowell Nelson, previous MBA biology teacher, are often strong. He is mostly remembered as easy to talk to, humorous, jovial, well liked, and interesting, though he also supposedly had unique idiosyncrasies. Many students recall good times with Nelson and his wife during choir activities and in their home. One alumnus cried when she heard the news and expressed a disbelief in the possibility of such allegations.

Dave Lyons, an MBA student from 1977 to 1981, remembers Nelson as a good teacher—he was fun and understanding toward kids. Says Lyons: "I did hear him tell a dirty joke to some male students once and thought it was cool that he could connect with us. Now I realize that it was inappropriate, especially at an Adventist-Christian school.... He was very open about the human reproductive system when we got to that chapter in biology, but I thought that much of the information was good to discuss because we were all curious about the other gender."

However, plaintiffs allege that Nelson performed sexual activities with them on his sundeck, where he sunbathed nude, and others testified

in depositions of inappropriate touching and sexual stimulation by Nelson.

"I don't think that enjoying nude sunbathing makes one a molester," says one former class officer. "It must have made an impression, though, because I remember little else the teacher said while teaching. I heard him talk about the virtues of sunbathing nude for health reasons. I remember avoiding visiting the Nelson home in fear of surprising him during one of his tanning sessions."

The fact that Nelson did indeed share his sunbathing activities with students, at least ten to twelve per year, is verified by Nelson in his depositions, according to Scully, although Nelson denied any associated sexual conduct.

A lawyer who knows the Nelson family well currently contracts with a school system to represent their teachers in work-related suits. The lawyer explains how lawsuits like this can go either way: "As an attorney who has represented over a hundred school teachers, I know these types of cases are very sensitive.... I have represented school teachers who have been accused of similar offenses. While sometimes the accusations are true, sometimes they are false."

The lawyer goes on: "Unfortunately, accusations of this type are so inflammatory that even when a teacher is later determined to be innocent, it is difficult for them to ever recover their good reputation. It is also difficult for a teacher to defend himself or herself against charges that are so stale."

Nelson currently teaches at Weimar College.

Due to the number of plaintiffs, the popularity of Nelson, the passing of Wittlake, and the lengthy time gap, many mysteries remain at this beachfront Adventist school. If Ad-

ventist Risk Management can settle this case, it will have closed the door on litigation from this particular California law.

Ezrela Cheah graduated from Southwestern Adventist University in May 2000 with a bachelor's degree in education and currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

Back to the Manual

By Bonnie Dwyer

For the 70 percent of church members who are women, the approach of another General Conference Session begs the question of whether anything will be done this time to address issues of gender inequality that mark operations of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Probably not, is the short answer. Whether that is good or bad depends on one's perspective of where the appropriate place is to address such issues. Should they be left to the local church and conference or should they be a matter for the world church to consider?

One item in the agenda section on the Church Manual calls for consideration of a proposed amendment to the wording of objective number two of the Department of Women's Ministries (page 118). It currently reads, "Affirm that women are of inestimable worth by virtue of their creation and redemption, and equip them for service in the church." The phrase *and offer women's perspectives on church issues* would be added to that sentence. That's the only agenda item that specifically addresses women.

During the past year, the creation of the General Conference Ministries and Services Review Commission ignited intense discussion in General Conference headquarters over the

role of women, particularly at the General Conference itself, because the commission recommended delegating the work of nine departments—including children's ministries, family ministries, and women's ministries—out to the divisions.

There was an outcry as a result that, in practice, those departments were the only way for women to serve at the General Conference and that moving them out to the divisions would almost eliminate women from the work of the General Conference.

The commission's report to Spring Council turned into a three and one-half hour debate that ended with the "receiving" of the Commission's report and passing it on to a new standing commission, which will evaluate church operations over the five-year period that begins after the world church's business meeting this summer. No one has been named to chair the commission.

So women will not be an issue in St. Louis. The work of the delegates will be to look particularly closely at details in the Church Manual and make adjustments—whether minor changes of phrasing to bring the book up to date or discussion of larger issues, such as an alternative baptismal vow.

Election of one-hundred-plus officers will also take a considerable amount of time at the session. The agenda includes the newest addition to the list of twenty-seven fundamental beliefs, as well as recommendations affirming the importance of the reading of Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy. Thirty-nine items in all will be considered.

