

The 1960s Crisis at the Seminary | BY HEROLD WEISS

1968 has come to be recognized as a significant moment in history. The war in Vietnam had become a quagmire and the anti-war demonstrations in many countries were in full swing. Student unrest in both Europe and the United States often occupied center stage in the evening news, overcrowding the pictures of the chemically-induced deforestation of Vietnam or the cold-blooded killing of civilians without ascertainable reasons. American young men were burning their draft cards in public places, and some were leaving for Canada. Of course, the events of 1968 were not spontaneous outbursts. They were the culmination of a long series of circumstances, and they cannot be properly understood apart from them. The same is true of the crisis that gripped the SDA Theological Seminary at that time. It also must be understood within its historical context.

Tensions between members of the faculty of the Seminary and officers of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists were frequent when the Seminary was housed in a building in the same block as the General Conference offices and the facilities of the Review and Herald Publishing Association in Takoma Park, Maryland. At that time Adventists were somewhat uncertain of the benefits of advanced academic studies. Undergraduate literature professors at Adventist colleges could find themselves in jeopardy before an administrator eager to avoid raising the ire of parents and members of the Board of Trustees because they had assigned the reading of a novel to their students. At the Seminary, Dr. Winton Beavon had to be cautious about his forays into philosophy and logic as oratorical tools. He was somewhat protected because of the very popular oratorical contests he conducted in Adventist colleges as an arm of the Temper-

ance Department of the General Conference. No Adventist college taught classes in logic or philosophy at that time.

Dr. Roland Loasby, the professor of New Testament at the Seminary, was a very engaging person, always jovial and eager to pull a student's leg. His classes on the Greek, Hebrew and English versions of the biblical texts were very popular with some students. To others, however, they were demonstrations of his lack of regard for the traditional Adventist interpretations and the writings of Ellen G. White. On account of their complaints to officers of the General Conference, Dr. Loasby often had to spend hours defending his teaching before people who had no competence in biblical languages.

The Old Testament professors avoided dealing with the theology of the Old Testament as if it were an electric third rail. Dr. Siegfried Horn taught history and archeology of the ancient New East. Alger Johns, who was doing doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins at the time, taught exegesis of some of the prophetic books and Daniel. Dr. William Murdoch, who had a doctoral degree in Church History from the University of Birmingham in England, taught an occasional course in Hebrew exegesis of a prophet, but was mainly the Professor of Theology.

The theological issues debated in the hallways and during lunch at the Review and Herald cafeteria centered on the kind of human nature assumed by the Son at his incarnation. Did he assume the human nature of Adam as he had been created, or the human nature of Adam after his expulsion from Eden? Or did he assume the human nature of his contemporaries, which by then was marred by the hereditarily-increased propensity to evil acquired after four-thousand years of human sinning? The significance of these debates and what made them extremely relevant, was the certainty that the 144,000 people who were to be translat-

ed to heaven without tasting death would have achieved the nature of Christ. There were also heated debates about how to understand this number. Was the reference to 144,000 to be taken literally or to be understood symbolically?

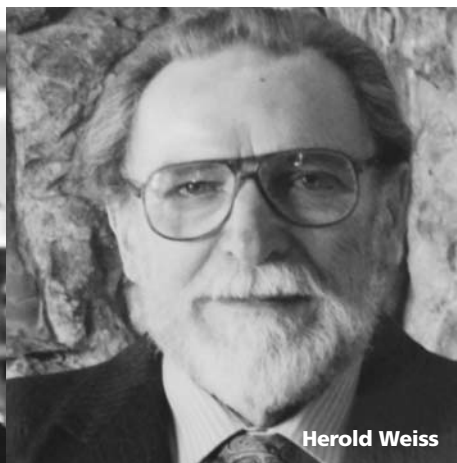
The decision as to who would be among the 144,000, of course, was being made right then at the Investigative Judgment. Everyone understood that it was a contemporary event taking place in heaven at the time, and its purpose was to determine who was going to be among the 144,000

the redeemed to their heavenly home. God's action on behalf of humanity was just. God is a God of love, not a God of wrath.

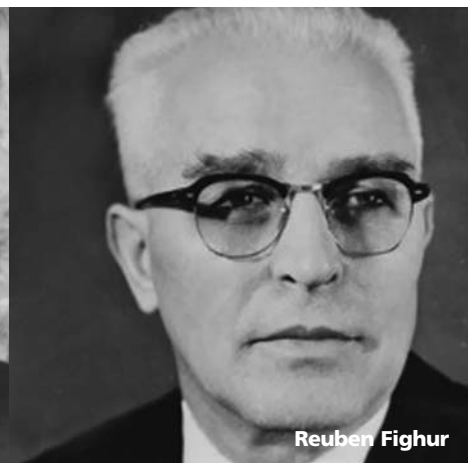
Heppenstall was a man who thought that the constant preaching of a judgment was not "good news." He had been deeply touched by the love of God; therefore, he chose to name what was going on in heaven "the Vindicating Judgment." To many students this was a heretical departure from traditional Adventism, and some officers of the General Conference agreed with them. (No



Siegfried Horn



Herold Weiss



Reuben Fighur

saved. The Sabbath sermons preached everywhere took care that no one forgot this for a moment.

This understanding of the Investigative Judgment, however, was challenged by Dr. Edward Heppenstall, a wonderful human being and a very effective theologian, even though his doctoral degree was in education. He was very much admired by some students and somewhat despised by others. (On account of this, he was often also called to explain himself at the General Conference offices next door.) Heppenstall's understanding of the Gospel did not equate it with a call to sinlessness in order to pass an examination at the Investigative Judgment. He gathered quotations from Mrs. White to the effect that the issue at the heavenly assize was not primarily to determine who would be among the 144,000. At issue was God's justice. Did God have the right to save anyone at all? God's character needed to be vindicated. At the heavenly sanctuary Jesus was demonstrating God's amazing love for humanity, and God's right to take

one at the time would have predicted that in 2013 the Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly would teach Heppenstall's understanding of the Investigating Judgment.)

Facing these recurrent confrontations, Elder Reuben Fighur, the president of the General Conference, "put on his construction-site hat and let the stones fall," as one of the faculty members put it. He kept a cool head and, even though quite conservative, supported moves to lead the denomination to a more honorable place in the Protestant landscape. At that time Adventists were considered a sect that specialized in stealing the sheep of other Christian folds. At the Seminary, E.D. Dick, the president, was a retired administrator who did not consider himself a theologian and basically stood by his faculty. His job was to be the middle man between the General Conference and the Seminary. Faculty members who had to report to a General Conference officer would occasionally also have to talk with Elder Dick, but only to keep him informed of

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what was going on. The Seminary's Dean, Dr. Charles Weniger, was in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the institution. He was an effective spokesperson for the Seminary with a wide circle of influence in Washington, and enjoyed considerable social connections. As a Dean he was an able administrator and a consummate diplomat.

The constant attacks on some members of the faculty, however, did take a toll on the psychological health of some. When it was decided to create Andrews University by incorporating the SDA Theological Seminary and Emmanuel Missionary College into one institution, Beavon

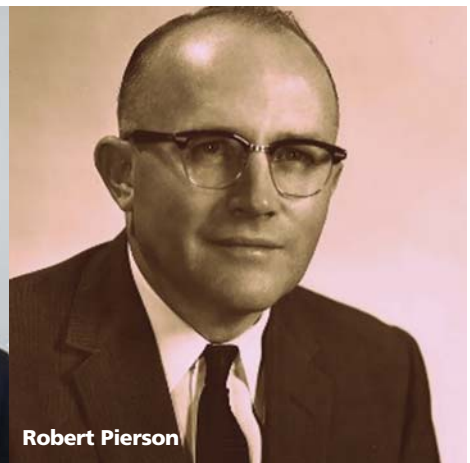
another very significant change took place. This one had to do with the student body. At Takoma Park the student body had consisted almost entirely of ordained pastors who had been working in different capacities, and had demonstrated scholarly interests and abilities. Many were missionaries who had returned from a five or seven-year assignment in a foreign land. Most of the students were involved in an MA program, with or without a thesis, which could be completed in four quarters, twelve months. Of the roughly one-hundred-thirty students in the Seminary, only twenty or so were working toward a



Karl Barth



Sakae Kubo



Robert Pierson

and Loasby chose, no doubt on account of many reasons, not to move to Berrien Springs, Michigan. Heppenstall did make the move, after much soul searching. No longer working a stone's throw away from the General Conference offices, he and others who made the move felt a bit liberated. They were now occupying a larger, better-designed building with room to grow. The faculty also received some new blood. Prominent in the faculty was Earle Hilgert. He had begun teaching at the Seminary in Takoma Park in the early 1950s, but had left in 1956 to work toward a PhD in New Testament Studies at the University of Basel in Switzerland, where Karl Barth, the most prominent neoorthodox theologian, taught. In 1959 Hilgert was back, working along with Loasby in the New Testament Department, where he soon began offering advanced seminars in New Testament Theology. When the Seminary was moved to Michigan in 1960, Loasby stayed in Maryland, and Hilgert became one of the most respected teachers at the Seminary. Soon Sakae Kubo with a doctorate from the University of Chicago joined him; and in 1965 I also became a member of the New Testament Department.

Not many years after the move to Berrien Springs,

Bachelor of Divinity degree. Among the one-hundred-ten MA students, only a few had graduated with a BA the previous year. SDA pastors were expected to have only a BA degree in religion from an Adventist college.

In the early 1960s, when the denomination was eager to shed its "sect" label and was gaining recognition as a legitimate Protestant body of believers, it was felt necessary to upgrade the educational requirements of its ministers. Thus, it was decided that the Bachelor of Divinity (BD) degree would become the requirement for ministry. Conferences would hire BA graduates and sponsor their study at the Seminary for two years (eight quarters). Then the students would work at the sponsoring Conference for nine months, as a kind of internship, and return to the Seminary for a final quarter the following summer. Thus they would fulfill the nine quarters required for the degree.

The decision to upgrade the educational level of ministers made it necessary for the Seminary to redesign the BD curriculum as a course of study for future pastors. Until then the degree had been designed as a course of study for professors of religion at Adventist colleges. Students fulfilled the requirements with a concentration in a specific area and

were required to write a dissertation. In other words, the degree had been conceived as an academic degree. Now it had to be redesigned as a professional degree, as it was in every other seminary in the country. The new curriculum would give the first-year students a foundation so that in their second year, they would be ready to take more advanced courses. Each department of the Seminary, therefore, designed its own two-tier course of studies.

The students who entered the Seminary in 1965 were the first to matriculate in the new BD curriculum. They were also the largest class ever to register because the degree had become the requirement for denominational ministry. In deference to accuracy, it must be acknowledged that many Conference presidents ignored the General Conference policy and continued to hire students and put them to work in churches straight out of college, and this has been the case even to this day.

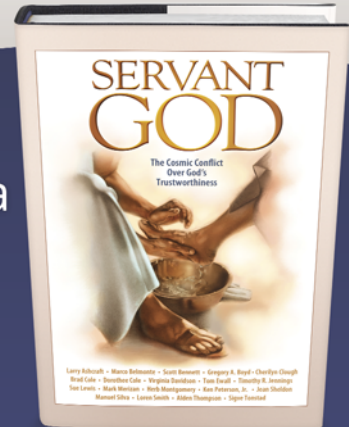
If Adventist ministers were to take their place among the respected ministers of other denominations, it was thought, they should be conversant with the different methods used for Bible study. They should also be conversant with the problems that biblical students face when the text is read with a commitment to understand its author, rather than as a mine from which to extract texts that support one's preconceived ideas. It should be legitimate, therefore, for a student to ask, Does the Bible teach what some say it teaches? Doing this kind of study, one ends up building a context within which it is possible to make sense of what a particular author wrote in a particular place. Anyone wishing to have an intelligent dialogue about the Bible with someone who has studied it seriously must be able to understand where a dialogue partner is coming from, and how they arrive at the views being offered. This means that a minister who is going to represent the Adventist church before people of other denominations or other faiths must know how others explain the composition of the Pentateuch, or the relations among the Synoptic Gospels. In order to equip students with the ability to carry on meaningful dialogues with non-Adventists, the new curriculum introduced courses such as *Introduction to the Old Testament* and *Introduction to the New Testament* that dealt with these kinds of problems in a serious way. In these courses it was made clear that investigating these questions was not a matter of faith, and that in this kind of historical exercise one could never achieve certainty. Of course, the text-

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books used had been written by conservative evangelicals who always ended up presenting the traditional solution to these problems as the most probable.

Many of the students taking these classes could not be happy with anything less than certainty. They could not see how becoming conversant with these problems and their solutions was at all helpful. Some of them thought that these exercises in the use of reason and problem-solving in regard to the writing, copying and interpretation of the Bible were a threat to their faith. Soon the professors realized that the attitude of the students, to a large degree, depended on their undergraduate experience. Students from some colleges immediately saw the value of coming to terms with modern biblical studies. Students from other colleges complained to their sponsoring Conference officials about what they were being taught.

The intensity of these complaints and the extent of their reach to the upper layers of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were not immediately appreciated by the Seminary faculty. Part of the problem was that the first-year students in 1965–66 did not have fellow students in the second year of the curriculum who could tell them how they were now enjoying the benefits of the foundational courses taken during the first year. These students were the trail blazers of the new curriculum and could not envision how these courses would help them to get a deeper understanding of what theology is and does. They could not differentiate between theological and historical studies. Many felt overwhelmed and disoriented when facing what advanced studies in historical, literary, psychological and social studies demand from serious Bible students. Even though the school year had its ups and downs, as all school years do, the faculty thought that the difficulties attached to the introduction of a new curriculum would pass. With time things would fall into place and the student body would come to calm the fears and comfort the insecurities of those who felt threatened by their advanced studies of the Bible, or by their confrontation with the history of Christian theology.

At the end of February 1966, Elder R. R. Bietz, the President of the Pacific Union Conference, came to conduct the Spring Week of Prayer at the Seminary. His theme was "Spiritual Dimensions of Christian Leadership." Elder Bietz preached at the morning Chapel period and at an evening meeting, when student wives would also attend. During the day Elder Bietz was available for private counseling and prayer with students. A faculty member thought it would be

profitable to have the faculty get-together with Elder Bietz. After informally seeking the opinion of the rest, he invited Elder Bietz to an informal meeting on Thursday night before he went back to California after the Vesper service at Pioneer Memorial Church. Since the requirement of a BA for ministers was still very much under discussion among church officials and some conferences were not supporting the policy, it was thought an opportune time to discuss this with a very prominent Union Conference president. Elder Bietz was a member of several General Conference committees, and his name was frequently mentioned as a possible future president of the General Conference. That meeting turned out to be an eye-opener for the faculty.

The meeting started, as planned, with a very friendly and productive conversation about the new curriculum and how it would impact the future of the church. The faculty was particularly interested in learning how the church administrators saw the changes and what they expected from them. After a fruitful time together, when it looked like the meeting was winding down, Elder Bietz said he needed to unload a burden on his heart before he left. He then reported that during the private counseling sessions with students he had heard mostly complaints about what they were studying, and that some had accused specific professors of destroying their faith by questioning the authority of the Bible and Mrs. White.

The revelation of the extent of student dissatisfaction with their Seminary experience fell on the faculty like buckets of ice water. Elder Bietz did not break student confidentiality. Neither did he point a finger at any faculty member. His decision to communicate to the faculty what he had learned during the week was taken by the faculty as a great favor. It made clear that something had to be done to improve student-faculty communication. No member of the faculty had in fact been doing what they had been accused of doing. It became evident that the students had not been prepared to take a look at areas of concern in theological reasoning. Just asking questions in an attempt to seek better answers was taken by some students as an assault on their faith. They had not learned the difference between faith (an ultimate commitment to God) and knowledge (the processing of information that is subject to review).

How to improve the situation, however, brought about some tensions among the faculty. On the one hand, there were those eager to reaffirm an ultra-conservative past with a strong sectarian attitude. On the other, there were those

who wished to find ways to do a better job trying to move the church forward toward a more effective witness in the modern world. In the middle were those who felt that professors are professionals committed to both their faith and their disciplines, and public relations was not part of their job description.

In the summer of 1966, Elder Robert Pierson, rather than Elder Bietz, became President of the General Conference. He had been working of late as president of two African divisions and had not

that would gain accreditation from the American Association of Theological Schools (AATS). The Seminary now had professors with degrees in theological studies from well-known European universities such as Basel, Geneva, Amsterdam, Edinburgh, and Birmingham, as well as from leading American universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, Michigan, Vanderbilt, and Duke. No doctoral program would be accredited if the theological faculty had only degrees in history or education. Hammill had been working



Gottfried Oosterwal



Roy Branson



Edward W. H. Vick

been part of the North American dialogue with the evangelicals nor involved in the production of the SDA Bible Commentary. He had no personal experience of the rigors of a graduate education, and was a proponent of the spirituality of revivals and public confessions at prayer meetings. His goal in life was to be the General Conference President who welcomed Christ at the Second Coming. One of the things he immediately thought necessary to the achievement of his goal was to purge the Seminary of questionable faculty members. Thus, he began to pressure Dr. Richard Hammill, the president of Andrews University, to conduct an investigation of the Seminary faculty.

This placed Hammill in a very difficult situation. His goal in life was to upgrade Andrews University to an institution granting doctoral degrees, particularly in biblical studies and theology. To that end he had been working to bring well-qualified professors to the faculty with doctoral degrees from prestigious universities in their teaching areas. This was a prerequisite for any doctoral program

on a long term plan, and by this time he felt about ready to approach AATS and begin the process to institute a doctoral program that would be accredited by it. He was not eager to upset the faculty he had worked so hard to assemble. Therefore, he found ways to avoid an inquisition of the Seminary faculty. He kept assuring Pierson that the faculty was fully committed to the mission of the Adventist church. In fact, in the years after the initial shock with the new curriculum in 1965, the atmosphere in the Seminary had noticeably improved. As expected, first-year students were coached by second-year students as to how to go about their studies, what to expect, what to take lightly and what to avoid. Things seemed to have finally fallen into place, and the train was running on its tracks.

Pierson, however, grew impatient, and threatened Hammill that he would purge the faculty himself if Hammill would not. The last thing Hammill needed was to have an outsider come in to make decisions about the internal affairs of the university. This would derail his hopes for

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the accreditation of a doctoral program. Thus, in the fall of 1968, he invited the Seminary faculty to a closed meeting in a conference room of the Administration building on a Friday morning when there were no classes at the Seminary. The meeting lasted two or three hours. The discussion had to do with how to make sure that all faculty members were working together toward a common goal. It appeared that some did not have a clear sense of what others were doing, and therefore the students may have been getting mixed signals that disturbed them and caused them to complain to their conference presidents. It was suggested that it would be good to have a series of faculty retreats in which to discuss with each other how each saw their role, and each could receive feedback from their colleagues. Mounting these retreats, of course, would require a budget. Moreover, it was difficult to predict how beneficial they would turn out to be. Would they help to unite the faculty? Or would they create further tensions? Time went by, and nothing was achieved, so Hammill announced that there would be another meeting on another Friday morning some weeks hence. During these stormy times, Dr. Murdoch, the towering Scottish gentleman who had become the paternalistic Dean of the Seminary when Dr. Weniger died shortly after the move to Berrien Springs, chose to remain a passive spectator.

At the second of Hammill's meetings with the faculty the conversation turned more specific. It had to do with the inspiration of Ellen White and the story of creation in the book of Genesis. All faculty members expressed themselves in support of Mrs. White's inspiration. The faculty consensus was, however, that neither the writings of the biblical authors nor the writings of Ellen White were *verbally* inspired. This point had been well established in the dialogue with the evangelicals, and had been a major factor in the failure of those talks. Adventists had refused to agree with evangelical claims to an inerrant, verbally-inspired Bible.

When the conversation turned to the story of creation and a concomitant short chronology of the earth's history, things became more complicated and some people tried to establish some room in which to deal with the problems attached to these matters. After the conversation had gone around and around, Siegfried Horn, the recognized authority in ancient history who was beginning to make a name for himself as a field archaeologist at the dust heap of ancient Heshbon, lost his patience and said that if it was a requirement to affirm that the earth was six-thousand years

old, he would offer his resignation on the spot. At this, president Hammill said something to the effect that nobody was required to affirm a six-thousand-year chronology. The number could be taken as a ball-park figure. Still, millions of years were not in the ball-park. The meeting ended shortly after that.

The local gossip had it that the members of the faculty specifically under suspicion of lack of adherence to traditional Adventism were Roy Branson, James Cox, Gottfried Oosterwal and myself. Oosterwal, who as an anthropologist was more knowledgeable of the ways of the world than any of us, decided that the best defense was a good offense. He challenged Hammill privately as to the basis of his being under suspicion. Hammill assured him that this was not so. Encouraged by this, the rest of us also had private conversations with Hammill and received assurances from him that he would vouch for our faithfulness before Pierson.

The one member of the faculty who had probably aroused most students against him was Edward W. H. Vick. His problems with students could not at all be related to a lack of orthodoxy. He was in a real sense one of the most conservative members of the faculty. The seriousness with which he challenged his students to look at issues, unfortunately, was beyond the limited abilities of many of them. Vick was at this time on sabbatical in England pursuing a DPhil at Oxford. He already had earned a PhD at Vanderbilt some years before. During the summer of 1967, Earle Hilgert, who was now the Academic Vice President, had visited him at Oxford and discussed with him the time of his return and his plans for the courses he would like to teach when he was back on campus. To Vick's astonishment, a few days before Christmas 1968 he received a letter from Hammill telling him that he was fired. To Vick's repeated letters asking for an explanation of this unreasonable turn of events, Hammill never gave a reasonable answer. Whatever the reasons for Hammill's decision, this affair gave the impression that Vick had been the one sacrificed by Hammill to placate Pierson's insistence for a purge at the Seminary.¹

What went on at the Seminary between 1965 and 1968 did not go unnoticed by the faculty at the other schools of the university. The heavy hand of the General Conference President was felt in all its threatening overtones by all faculties. Early in the 1970s the Arts and Sciences faculty had a retreat with Pierson at Camp Au Sable in the northern woods of Michigan's lower peninsula. Its aim was to bring the whole faculty to toe the new party line.

In subsequent years several members of this faculty decided to seek employment elsewhere; the asphyxiating atmosphere reigning on campus surely was a factor in some of these moves. Edward Specht, the highly respected long-time chair of the Mathematics Department, went to teach at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB). Bruce Zimmerman of the Physics Department also went to teach at IUSB. Another member of the Mathematics department Don Rhoads decided to open an electronics store in Bloomington, Indiana. James Van Hise of the Chemistry Department went to Tri-State University in Angola, Indiana. Joseph Battistone of the Religion Department left to become a pastor in the North Carolina Conference. William Peterson of the English Department went to teach at the University of Maryland at College Park. Peterson, in particular, bore much of the brunt of Pierson's ire on account of his having authored a paper revealing the extent of Mrs. White's borrowing from other sources. Battistone, instead of presenting a theology of Mrs. White by extracting "proof texts," did a theological study of her writings and showed that the center of her theological constellation was the Great Controversy theme. They were the pioneers in the academic study of the writings of Ellen G. White, but felt uncomfortable at the only Adventist university which then had graduate programs in arts and sciences.

At the Seminary, Earle Hilgert had largely left the classroom to become Academic Vice President. A few years later he resigned to fulfill his vocational dreams at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. Sakae Kubo found refuge as the Seminary Librarian, away from the classroom. Roy Branson went on a fellowship to the Center for Bioethics in Washington D.C., a think-tank that advised Congress and the Executive branch of the national government on legislation that affected medical ethics, and decided not to come back. I resigned from the faculty and went on to teach full-time at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, where, in the fall of 1968, I had been sent by the Seminary to teach a course in Protestant Theology.

It must also be noted that this significant moment in the history of the Seminary produced one of the most exceptional cohorts of Adventist leaders. Between 1965 and 1969 the following were given their theological foundations for doing further study and becoming distinguished servants of the church. While in fear of failing to list all who belong in this group, I will mention Roy Adams, Niels-Eric Andreasen, Gordon Bietz, John Brunt, Jaime Cruz, Pieter Damsteegt, Jon Dybdahl, Walter Douglas, Erwin Gane,

Ronald Graybill, Warren Johns, Paul Landa, David Larsen, Rick Rice, Samuel Schmidt, Charles Scriven, Johan Storfjell, Alden Thompson, Warren Trenchard, Jan Smuts van Rooyen, Manuel Vazquez, Nancy Vyhmeister, Werner Vyhmeister, Jim Walters, Woodrow Whidden, Richard Winn, and Gerald Winslow. I know of no other four-year period in which the Seminary produced a comparable group of educational leaders.

To conclude this account, I will suggest that in its short-lived golden age, the seminary made a most significant impact on the church by empowering a generation of Adventist leaders that have been serving the church under very trying times, providing a more biblically-informed and relevant understanding of the Gospel. This is true notwithstanding the reactionary backlash it produced, whose effects are felt to this day. The current crisis of the church is in marked ways the completion of a forty-year cycle in which the reactionary forces of those wishing to reaffirm a sectarian past and the initiatives of those wishing to respond to the call of the future are at odds. Some are eager to conduct purges on the basis of nineteenth-century Adventist positions and others are seeking ways to express the Gospel that transcends all cultures in ways that are understood in any culture. The search for "present truth," the contemporary understanding of the Bible, is not a threat to faith, but the best way to keep faith alive. Facing the present crisis it is well to remember the dictum: "Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it."² ■

Dr. Herold Weiss is professor emeritus of religious studies at Saint Mary's



College in Notre Dame, Indiana. He is a native of Montevideo, Uruguay and received his BA from Southern Missionary College, his MA and BD from Andrews University, and his PhD from Duke University. Dr. Weiss also was a columnist for *spectrummagazine.org*. He is the originator of the Café Hispano section of the *Spectrum* website.

References

1. Dr. Vick has given an account of the affair in his article, "From My Point of View." It is available from his website: www.ewhivck.com.
2. For a more personal account of the events covered here, see my book *Finding My Way in Christianity: Recollections of a Journey*, chap. "Berrien Springs" (Cantonment, FL: Energion Publications, 2010), 137–161.