


SPECTRUM

and the Association of Adventist Forums

An excerpt from *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Change in Adventism, 1966–1979*, 2022, courtesy of Oak and Acorn Publishing.

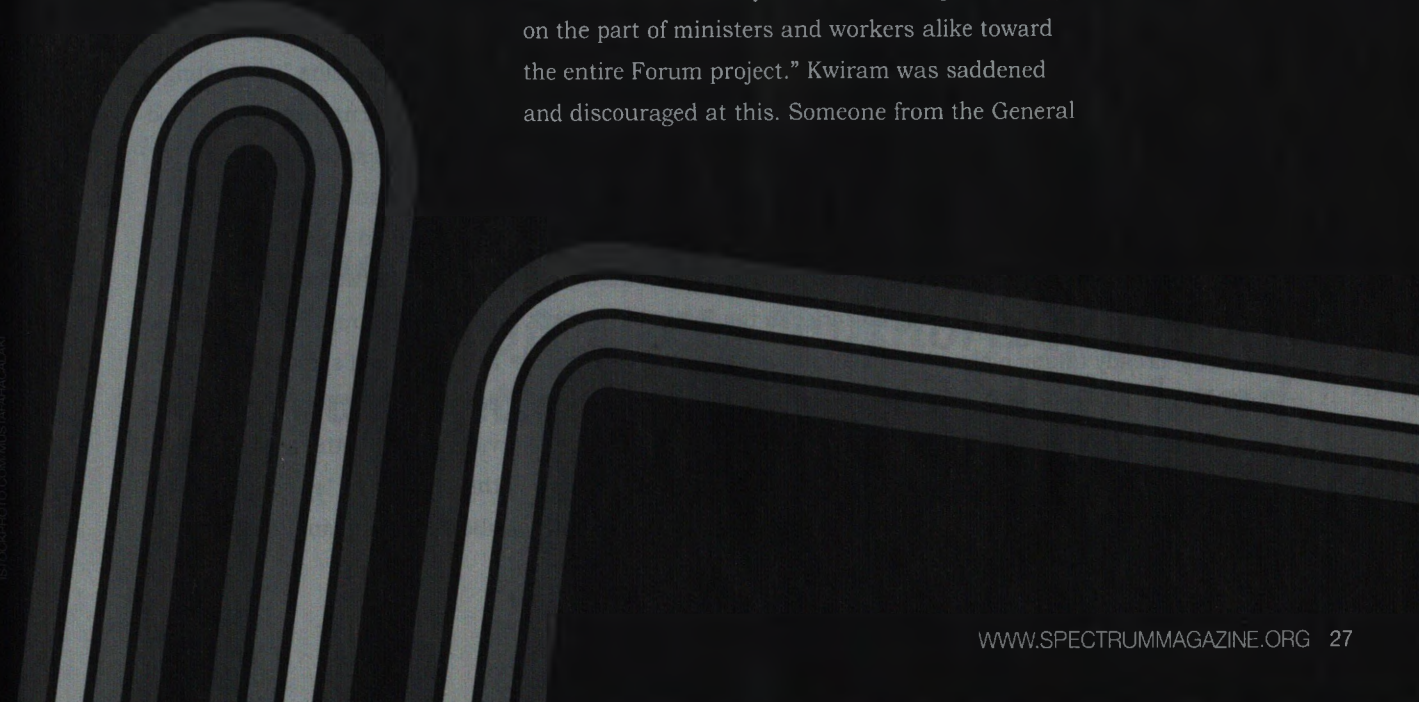
By Gil Valentine

The proposal for the organization of an Association of Adventist Forums had been thoroughly vetted by General Conference officials in late 1967 and, although not considering it wise to formally approve or authorize the venture, the North American Division at its year-end meeting had given it a green light and agreed to appoint consultants and advisors to the group. Its birth had nevertheless been anticipated with nervous apprehension.



Forum chapters were soon organized around the nation and regular meetings scheduled with a range of current issues discussed, including some that were decidedly controversial. If administration apprehension accompanying the birth of the forum groups had led to significant unease, by the time the journal was put together 15 months later, the unease had turned to animosity. *Spectrum* magazine had been expected to appear in late 1968, but its first quarterly issue did not come off the press until March 1969. Pierson revealed his nervousness about the publication by his unwillingness to write a sentence or two in support of either the journal or the association when invited to by officers who were preparing a prospectus to help get the journal off the ground.

Harvard University chemistry professor Alvin Kwiram, who served as the first president of the Association of Adventist Forums (AAF), had mentioned in his letter of solicitation to Pierson that he had “sensed a fairly extensive feeling of hostility on the part of ministers and workers alike toward the entire Forum project.” Kwiram was saddened and discouraged at this. Someone from the General



***Molleurus Couperus,*
founding editor of
*Spectrum***

Conference had spoken publicly against the group and was fanning up a “psychology of fear.” That individual, reflecting some “unfounded” fear, had made false accusations that were calculated to damage the cause of the organization. Kwiram reminded the president of his speeches in favor of the group in the meeting of college presidents, one of the groups that had reviewed and endorsed the proposal for an association of forums. Would Pierson be prepared to say something similar now? Kwiram sought to persuade him that such a statement would help to counteract the false information and also indicate to the church’s “creative and educated” young folk that they were valued.¹ Pierson declined. He had not yet seen a copy of *Spectrum* (it was still at press), and he would want to evaluate it first. He was aware, he said in his reply, that some around him had “definitely voiced concern” over some of the discussions already taking place in forum meetings, although personally he had “not detected hostility.” He hoped that the association would follow the



pattern of the Adventist students he had met recently at the University of Sydney in Australia who gave “major emphasis” to witnessing to non-Adventist students. “We do not want hostility,” he assured Kwiram.² Sixteen months later, the General Conference indicated to forum leaders that they would be willing to send out a promotional item for the journal to ministers and educators on their mailing lists if *Spectrum* reimbursed the expense, but the offer had not been taken up.³

Pierson also manifested his nervousness about the forum enterprise in the reminders to two of his colleagues who advised the forum organization. He wanted them to keep very close to it. In May, he wanted to know how close education director Charles

Hirsch and Neal Wilson were keeping to the group. Hirsch had written an article for the first issue, the only one of the General Conference staff to write for the journal during the first few years. By the time Pierson wrote to enquire of Hirsch, he had read the first issue and had noted with alarm his perception that it had “intimated that there will be articles opposed to Seventh-day Adventist doctrine,” suggesting that the journal would be a good place to air such positions.⁴ The first issue had not, in fact, said it would oppose doctrines. Loma Linda University professor Molleurus Couperus, who served as editor, had spoken in his first editorial of the “search for new visions and better answers” and of the concern to “speak the truth” about God “in language that is

fresh and pertinent to today,” but there was no indication of opposing doctrines.⁵ Kwiram, in his introductory statement for the first issue, spoke of rapidly changing times, the church finding itself having moved almost imperceptibly “into a new era” that called for “present truth,” but he had not spoken of challenging doctrines.⁶ Pierson’s “intimation” apparently reflected a deep-seated fear. A month later, he wrote to Hirsch again seeking “further suggestions on what we might do to bridge the gap with our intellectuals.” Forsaking his military metaphors for more pastoral ones, he said that these folks were a group “that really weighs heavily on my heart.” He was anxious “not to shut them out” but to “open ways and means of taking them in.”⁷ Several General Conference Union Conference officers would speak to the 15 local chapter forum groups, and several even wrote for the new journal with its 1,600 subscribers.⁸ Pierson would eventually bring himself to make a couple of presentations at Adventist forum meetings as a gesture of good will, but he would never write for *Spectrum*.

Neal Wilson, who appears to have been more at ease with forum people than Pierson, wrote to conservative Charles Cottrell in September 1969 to answer his anxious questions about the new developments. He sought to correct Cottrell’s perception that the association was a self-appointed group “set up in anger” against the church “to be a pressure group.” Rather, it was an attempt to meet needs that had “grown out of our very complex society.” He explained the origins of the organization and its status. The General Conference felt it could not officially “authorize such an organization” nor, on the other hand, could it “turn a deaf ear.” Realizing that they could not “prevent” it and encouraged by the desire of the students to work with the church, they had officially agreed to offer them advice and counsel. Wilson reported that he had attended a number of the group’s public meetings in various places around the country and that about 90% of the people involved were very supportive of the church. There were some folks from Burbank, California, who were more radical, and even though some of these were also involved in forum, their Burbank-sponsored organization and magazine *Perspective* were not formally linked to the forums. He knew that Burbank member Wesley Nash, a banker, had spoken on church finance, and Ervin Taylor, an Adventist professor of anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, had spoken on the problem of the age of the earth at a forum meeting in San Bernardino,

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California. Wilson knew also that these talks had been reported in the local press, and he regretted this. But there was no reason to repudiate the group yet, he argued. Speakers like Nash and Taylor did more to damage the forum than to help it, he thought, and the strength of the forums depended on local chapter leaders.

For the most part, Wilson was very confident of the forum leaders, he told Cottrell. Church leaders were aware of the “risks” and “dangers” and were watching closely. If it became “necessary to do something drastic,” he assured Cottrell, the church “would not lack for courage to take the matter in hand.”⁹ Wilson felt that he could shape and influence the organization to keep it on track. In fact, in surprising ways, the establishment of *Spectrum* was already quietly influencing decisions being made by the General Conference without hardly anyone noticing. When Dr. Herbert Douglass was called from the presidency of AUC to serve as associate editor of the *Review*, Carcich observed that one of the objectives of the appointment was to give credibility to the *Review* team in a way that would “do much to blunt the cutting edge of the critical publications that have sprung up during the past few years.”¹⁰ Subconsciously, church leadership was already shaping its decision-making with *Spectrum* and the church’s intellectuals in mind.

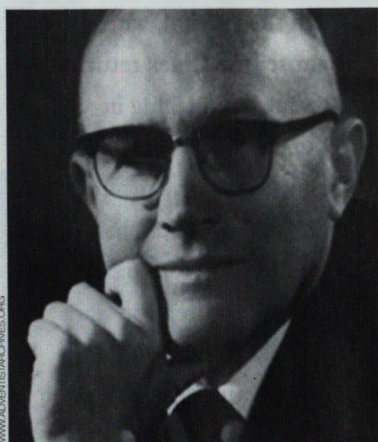
Given the many eyes and ears beyond the walls of meeting places, it was

often a hazardous exercise for church employees to speak at a forum event. The celebrated Voice of Prophecy speaker H.M.S. Richards, for example, found himself having to give an account to the General Conference president for what he ventured to say at a forum meeting at Andrews in November 1969. Richards had spoken for a forum in the seminary chapel on how the church had changed in the previous 40 years. He said he saw danger in a drift to “institutionalism” and the problem of investing more finances overseas than in the homeland. He had advocated for a strong and separate North American Division. In answering questions, he had imagined some changes in church structure that would free up more resources for evangelism. The talk had been reported in a front-page article in the *Student Movement*, which is how it came

to the notice of Pierson. He wrote to Richards from India, where he was travelling, expressing his worry and concern that Richards should say such things in public.¹¹ Pierson wondered if the “young zealots” who edited the *Student Movement* (history major undergraduate Eric Anderson and math major undergraduate Roy Benton) may have given a particular slant to the story more than was warranted. When the story was picked up in the *La Sierra Student Criterion*, the editor had commented that Richards was “the first major denominational leader [who] openly supported the progressive movement for change in the church.” It particularly disturbed Pierson that Richards would be thus identified. A short time later, Pierson would confide to a close colleague that he was very strongly opposed to any idea of more “autonomy for North

America.” In his view this was “the wrong direction,” although he did not want to be quoted publicly on the matter. He apparently realized it was a sensitive issue.¹² In his reply, Richards assured the president that he was not finding fault with him personally or with anybody but himself and sought to clarify and defend what he had said and explained why. He expressed “deepest regret” that his words may have been misunderstood and that the matter had brought worry and concern to the president.¹³

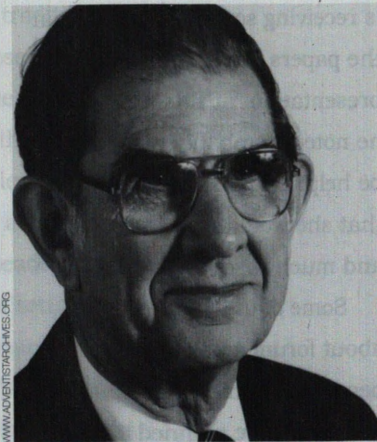
The risk of speaking at forums had heightened as 1970 unfolded. Late in the year, Miriam Wood, columnist for the *Review* and spouse to its editor, agreed to speak for the forum meeting in Boston on the topic “Discrimination and the Adventist Woman Employee.” Two months prior to the November event, she felt it necessary to



Robert H. Pierson
 General Conference President
 June 16, 1966
 to January 3, 1979



H.M.S. Richards
 Voice of Prophecy
 Founder/Speaker
 October 19, 1929 to 1969



Neal C. Wilson
 General Conference President
 January 3, 1979
 to July 5, 1990

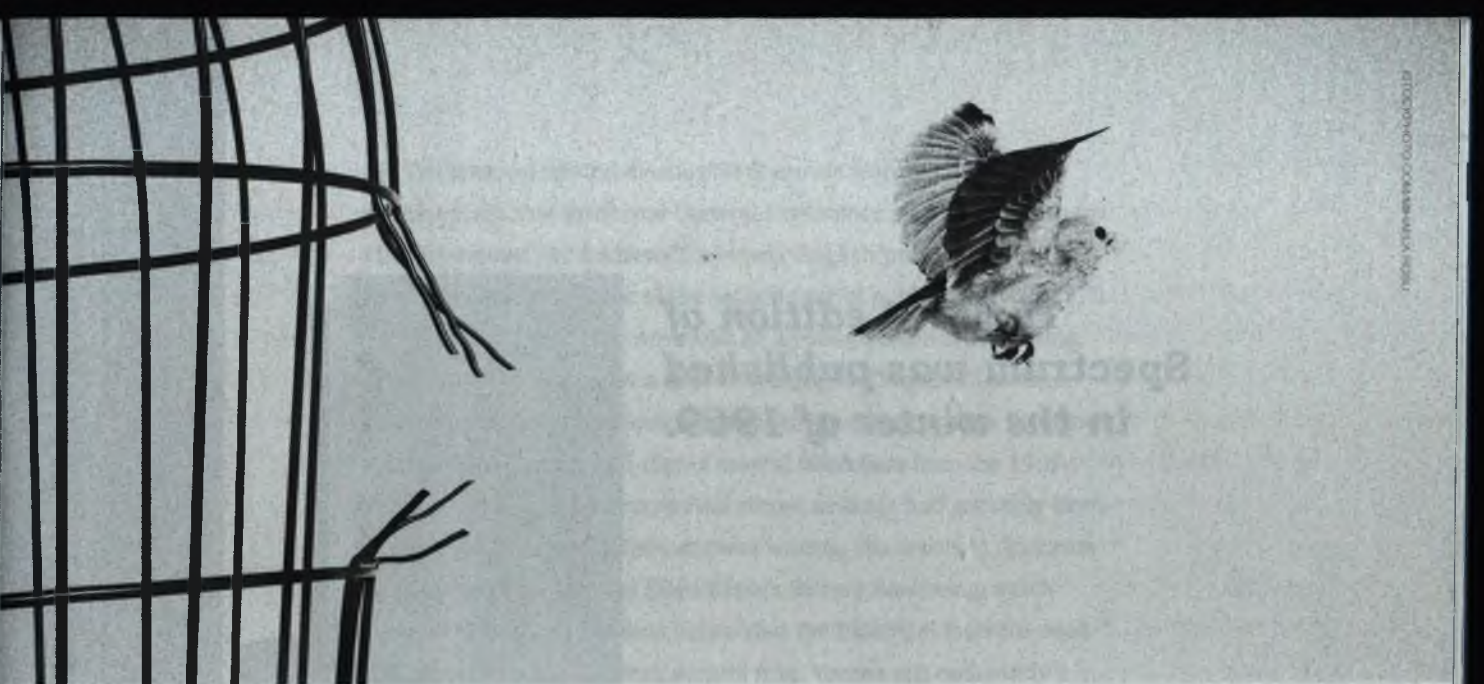
alert Pierson to her acceptance of the invitation and to try and avert misunderstanding. "I am writing this letter," she explained, "to affirm my loyalty to the SDA church and my confidence in your administration lest either of these attitudes be called into question."¹⁴ She was "not a member of Women's Liberation," she explained, and, though her paper would be critical of employment practices, she did not think it would make Pierson's responsibilities "more onerous." She had received her husband's permission to speak, and he had "ruthlessly edited" her paper. Pierson could read a copy in advance if he wished. She wanted to cover all her bases and knew that forum environments could be radioactive. Pierson appreciated the heads up. "It was thoughtful of you to clue me in," he noted in his reply. He was sure that Mrs. Wood "would not be a protagonist for the Women's lib agitation that is receiving so much attention in the papers these days." Such a presentation "at this juncture," he noted, "probably would not be helpful," but he was confident that she would "use discretion and much wisdom" in her talk.¹⁵

Some of the apprehension about forum activities arose because in some locations meetings were planned during the worship hour and on other occasions the topics were not considered suitable for Sabbath

discussion. Local conference presidents channeled these concerns back to forum leaders through Neal Wilson.¹⁶ Part of the heightened sense of risk speakers felt exposed to when they addressed a forum group, as already noted, arose from hostility generated by Burbank church's Ervin Taylor, who not only presented on the highly provocative age-of-the-earth problem but also published copies of his talks or had reports on them published in the local press. This made him "far more dangerous" than Brinsmead in the eyes of vice president Bietz. Wilson considered Taylor to have "abused the purpose of the Association" and brought it "discredit."¹⁷ Pierson, even more disturbed, would have liked to see Taylor disfellowshipped for his attitudes and activities, but local conference president Helmuth Retzer considered that "the cause" would be even more damaged by such an attempt. Bietz doubted whether it would even be possible, given the general attitudes of members at the Burbank church. Fundamentalist church member Henry Pearl of the Glendale church interpreted Taylor's publishing of his forum talks in the local press as having a Machiavellian purpose. Getting the "intellectualism and liberalism" abroad into the public notice and having it become a matter of record that church

leaders had not responded with discipline, he believed, would eventually help protect teachers in denominational employment from the reach of their governing boards on a technical and legal basis, should their employment ever become a matter of dispute. Pearl was fearful for the future and felt that church leaders should not fail to take disciplinary action.¹⁸ Pierson, although naturally reactionary, nevertheless felt constrained in what could be done, and he declined to follow the path that Pearl had intimated.

During the first five years *Spectrum* was published (1969-1974), it made a significant contribution to the church even as it deeply distressed the General Conference president. Approximately 175 major articles were published across 15 broad topic areas, as detailed in the table on page 34. All together, 165 authors found a voice through the journal, with some of them several times returning to a theme or engaging in dialogue with respondents over several issues of the journal. Several poets were published repeatedly, and occasionally the journal featured the work of accomplished Adventist artists. Encouraging expression through the creative arts was part of the mission of *Spectrum* from the beginning. As might be expected, *Spectrum's* most



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frequently addressed topic area was Adventist theology—sometimes from a broad and philosophical perspective and sometimes from a more specific doctrinal perspective highlighting particular themes like the Sabbath or the Second Advent. The most troubling topics for Elder Pierson were those that addressed the age of the earth and the work of Ellen White. In both areas, the journal featured articles challenging the church's traditional ways of expressing its understanding. New data and its implications for the traditional positions were carefully analyzed and solutions proposed. Church specialists and authorities who were well-versed in the traditional viewpoints also presented responses and defenses of the traditional positions. In introducing a cluster of unsolicited articles on the age of the earth in 1971, the editor, Molleurus Couperus, acknowledged that this was a highly sensitive area and that "some readers may feel threatened by discussions on the subject." His careful setting out of the historical context for the discussion and its importance reflected a conscientious sense of pastoral responsibility. The "almost complete unanimity about the age of our earth" that had "developed among scientists" in recent times, however, was based on many lines of evidence, and the topic should not be avoided.¹⁹

***The first edition of
Spectrum was published
in the winter of 1969.***



Topic	Frequency
Adventist Theology – Doctrines – Philosophy	30
Ellen G. White Studies	19
Adventist and General Church History	17
Adventist Mission – Philosophy and Practice	16
Age of Earth/Life – Creation Issues	14
SDA Higher Education Policy & Practice – Finance	14
Church Organization Structure – Finance – Salaries	10
Church-State Relations – Federal Aid	9
Ethics – Abortion – Moral Issues	9
Military Service – Morality of War	8
Race	8
Health – Medical Outreach – Social Welfare	7
Science and Religion – Philosophy	5
Equality of Women	5
Biblical Studies – Archaeology	4
Total Major Articles & Responses to Articles	175
Book Reviews ²⁰	51
Poetry – Photographs – Featured Art	59

Figure 2: Summary of Topics Addressed in Spectrum 1969-1974²¹

The most celebrated discussion *Spectrum* featured during its earliest years that unnerved General Conference leaders was perhaps the one initiated by Andrews University English professor William Peterson in the last issue of the second year of publication, Fall 1970. Peterson had become an Adventist as a young person after reading *The Great Controversy*. In a later re-reading of Chapter 15 on the French Revolution, Peterson noted strikingly close parallels between Ellen White's writing and that of several historians from the 19th-century romantic historical school whose writings had generally been discredited, even at the time she was writing. His article in *Spectrum* documented the extent of Ellen White's literary borrowing, which set out the basis for his conclusion that the historical material used and discussed had not been derived from visions but exclusively from the historical sources.²² The borrowing included not just facts and sequences of events but the assumptions of the historians and their entire anti-Catholic interpretive schema. Siegfried Horn had attended a seminary faculty colloquium eight months earlier in 1970 when Peterson had first publicly presented his paper, and he found its argument compelling. He noted in his diary two days later, "The trouble is that our leaders have put Ellen White on such a high pedestal as authority on history, chronology, science, diet, health, social life & what have you, that they would wreck the church if they would dare to admit that she was wrong in any of these disciplines. So, they go on muddling until a catastrophe occurs, hoping that the good Lord will soon come to solve their problems, which for them are unsolvable. A real revolution could come one of these days."²³

As Horn had suspected, Peterson's *Spectrum* article generated huge shock waves among the leadership and more broadly in the church. Arthur White xeroxed a copy to Pierson and to all the members of the White Estate board immediately upon reading it—even before he had read the rest of the journal or even the accompanying article by Branson and Weiss arguing that Ellen White was a proper subject of historical inquiry. He intimated a sense of offense that none of the White Estate personnel had been approached by either the editor or the author for consultation or for a response. Just what the trustees would feel their responsibility to be in the matter he did not know, but the intimation of his letter is that he thought they should make some response.²⁴ Seminary dean Murdoch also wrote to Pierson after reading the autumn issue of *Spectrum*, expressing concern that readers would assume that the sentiments of the Peterson article would be attributed more broadly to the seminary faculty.²⁵ In damage control mode, he sought to distance the seminary

from the piece by observing that some of Peterson's statements about Ellen White's writing of history were "very unfortunate," and he noted several of these to indicate that he disagreed with these parts of the article. He reminded Pierson that Weiss had not been with the seminary now for two years. Clearly the seminary administration (Murdoch spoke of "we" and "us") felt under siege, and he needed to defend the seminary's reputation to Pierson.²⁶ The sense of siege is also illustrated by Murdoch including in his letter a report to Pierson that seminary students like Raymond Dabrowski and Tom Dybdahl were insisting on being allowed to wear beards. They were "particularly vocal" and "quite critical" against seminary regulations and procedures on the matter. The students were sons of denominational workers, one of whom was a physician, another a union president. What was the seminary to do? Pierson set up a consultation with the anxious dean to discuss the problems.²⁷

Peterson's ideas generated responses from a number of authors, including an extensive reply from Paul Bradley, then chairperson of the White Estate Trustees. Two years after Peterson's 1970 piece, Ron Graybill provided a rather amusing postscript to the extensive exchange when he reported that he had discovered

that Ellen White had not been using the 19th-century historians directly after all.²⁸ Instead, she had borrowed directly and extensively from Uriah Smith's treatment of the French Revolution in his *Thoughts on Daniel*, and Smith himself may well have been badly using a secondary source for his sources as well.²⁹ Literary borrowing there certainly was, but the sources were more indirect than at first realized. The real problem, however, was how to understand the authority resident in *The Great Controversy*, given what was now known about the sources used. Theological questions such as these unnerved Pierson and other General Conference officials.

Probing questions and criticism of the church's organizational structure in the pages of *Spectrum* vexed Pierson even more, it seems. After articles of this kind appeared in two consecutive issues in early 1972, he worried to a colleague that "our intellectuals are asserting themselves." On a theoretical basis he had "no objection to this," he observed, but he was anxious that "they are going to create some problems that are going to be very real" in the church.³⁰ Two months later, to the two colleagues whom he trusted were keeping an eye on the forums, he confided, "There still lurks in the dark recesses of my heart, some concerns regarding

the operations of our Adventist Forums and the publication of *Spectrum*." He was constantly hearing remarks that were "not very complementary."³¹ He needed to know that the two advisors were still working closely with the association people. Intellectuals, he feared, would damage the church.

Seminary archaeology professor Lawrence (Larry) Geraty reluctantly conceded to lead the Association of Adventist Forums in 1972, and he wrote a courtesy letter to inform Pierson of the change and ask advice on how to improve the relationship of AAF with the General Conference officials. Geraty diplomatically acknowledged that the forum had made "its share of mistakes" and he wanted to ensure a "positive future" for AAF. Pierson read Geraty's letter with "considerable interest." His "main counsel," he said, was that Geraty should work "to keep the Forum, truly Seventh-day Adventist." The General Conference president considered that when other Christian churches had "turned their backs on the basics of the gospel," they had lost their way. He was "uneasy" when the forum moved into areas that had proved "the undoing of other churches." Pierson did not specify what these topics were, but behind the vague references it seems that matters of the age of the earth and creation loomed large. "We simply must

not let Seventh-day Adventists follow a similar course," Pierson stressed to Geraty.³² The threat to employment for anyone associated with leadership in the forum was sufficiently strong and compromising

to the independence of AAF that, 12 months later, Geraty resigned from the presidency with the strong recommendation that future presidents not be employees of the church.³³ Tolerated with the greatest of

reluctance, AAF and *Spectrum* provided a medium for "intellectuals" to influence the church, and this was a serious threat to Robert Pierson and his colleagues in church leadership.

ENDNOTES

1. A. Kwiram to R.H. Pierson, Jan. 27, 1969. RG11, Fld: K54 (1969), GCArch.
2. R.H. Pierson to A. Kwiram, Feb. 14, 1969. RG11, Fld: K54 (1969), GCArch.
3. N.C. Wilson to R.E. Taylor, May 5, 1970. RG11, Fld: T-106 (1970), GCArch.
4. R.H. Pierson to C.B. Hirsch, May 5, 1969. RG11, Fld: NAD-Wilson (1969), GCArch.
5. Molleurus Couperus, "Challenge," *Spectrum* 1.1 (Winter 1969), p. 77.
6. A. Kwiram, "Introduction," *Spectrum* 1.1. (Winter 1969), p. 4.
7. R.H. Pierson to C.B. Hirsch, June 27, 1969. RFG 11, Fld: Education-Hirsch (1969), GCArch.
8. Roy Branson, "Adventist Forums: another bulwark against indifference and apostasy," *Review and Herald*, May 14, 1970, pp. 16-17. Branson's report provides a helpful overview of the launch of the new organization and its journal.
9. N.C. Wilson to C.M. Cottrell, Sept. 8, 1969. RG11, Fld: Co-22 (1969), GCArch.
10. T. Carcich to R.H. Pierson, Nov. 10, 1969. RG11, Fld: Carcich (1969), GCArch.
11. "Richards Speaks for Change in SDA Church," *Student Movement*, Nov. 13, 1969, p. 1. Pierson's initial letter of complaint appears not to be extant.
12. R.H. Pierson to R.R. Bietz, April 20, 1970. RG11, Fld: Bietz (1970) GCArch. Pierson asked Bietz to not quote him on this view but to "keep in mind my feeling." He had then underlined the last part of his sentence, "for I feel very strongly on this."
13. H.M.S. Richards to R.H. Pierson, Jan. 5, 1970; R.H. Pierson to H.M.S. Richards, Jan. 13, 1970. RG11, Fld: VOP-Richards (1970), GCArch. Richards' reply is copied to K.H. Wood, which suggests that concerns may have been shared more widely.
14. Miriam Wood to R.H. Pierson, Sept. 20, 1970. RG11, Fld: Wo-118 (1970), GCArch.
15. R.H. Pierson to Mrs. K.H. Wood, Sept. 28, 1970. RG11, Fld: Wo-118 (1970), GCArch.
16. N.C. Wilson to A. Kwiram, R. Branson, and T. Walters, March 24, 1970. RG11, Fld: NAD-Wilson (1970), GCArch.
17. N.C. Wilson to R.E. Taylor, May 5, 1970. RG11, Fld: T-106 (1970), GCArch.
18. R.R. Bietz to R.H. Pierson, May 13, 1970. RG11, Fld: Bietz (1970), GCArch.
19. M. Couperus, "Earth's History," *Spectrum* 3.1 (Winter 1971), pp. 4-5.
20. Book Reviews covered a wide range of topics and varied in length. Reviews of books on the creation and the age of the earth appeared with the greatest frequency. Four of the book reviews were of such length they are included in the total for articles on creation and the age of the earth.
21. The summary provides approximate totals.
22. William S. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," *Spectrum* 2.4 (Autumn 1970), pp. 57-69. See also Peterson, "Ellen White's Literary Indebtedness," *Spectrum* 3.4 (Autumn 1971). p. 78.
23. SHHD, April 11, 1970.
24. A.L. White to R.H. Pierson, Dec. 24, 1970. RG11, Fld: White Estate (1970), GCArch. Roy Branson and Herold Weiss, "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," *Spectrum*, 2.4 (Autumn 1970), pp. 30-34.
25. W.G.C. Murdoch to R.H. Pierson, Dec. 22, 1970. RG11, Fld: Andrews U-Murdoch (1971), GCArch.
26. *Ibid.*
27. R.H. Pierson to W.G.C. Murdoch, Jan. 11, 1971. RG11, Fld: Andrews U-Murdoch (1971), GCArch.
28. Ron Graybill, "How Did Ellen White Choose and Use Historical Sources?" *Spectrum*, 4.3 (Summer 1972), pp. 49-53.
29. Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Daniel* (Battle Creek, Michigan: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1873).
30. R.H. Pierson to D.K. Short, April 6, 1972. RG11, Fld: Short (1972), GCArch.
31. R.H. Pierson to N.C. Wilson and C.B. Hirsch, June 1, 1972. RG11, Fld: NAD-Wilson (1972), GCArch.
32. L. Geraty to R.H. Pierson, Oct. 3, 1972; R.H. Pierson to L. Geraty, Oct. 25, 1972. RG11, Fld: AU-2 (1972), GCArch.
33. L. Geraty email to the author, Dec. 21, 2020.