

# Meet the President

*Editor's Note: W. Richard Leshar was appointed to the post of president by the Andrews University Board of Trustees on February 27, 1984. Dr. Leshar spent four days on campus March 12 to 15, meeting with vice presidents, deans, faculty and staff members. The following interview took place during that visit. He and his wife, Veda, were introduced to the faculty at a reception on March 13. Dr. Leshar expects to take up his duties as president about May 1 this year.*

**Dr. Leshar, by the time this issue of FOCUS is mailed in late May, many of us here at Andrews will feel like we know you. However, FOCUS readers all around the world won't have had that opportunity, so first let's talk about you and your family. Tell us something about your parents and your growing-up years.**

Well, my parents are from Pennsylvania and I grew up in Carlsisle, Pa. My father was a barber and colporteur. My mother has been an Adventist all of her life; my father was converted when he was about 25. Both are still living. My father is 94. I went to church school in Harrisburg, Pa., and went to academy at Shenandoah Valley Academy in Virginia. Then I attended Atlantic Union College.

**Why did you choose AUC?**

Well, as I was finishing school at Shenandoah, a number of faculty members had calls to AUC. It happened that the dean of boys at Shenandoah, Robert

Reynolds, was going to become the dean at Atlantic Union College. I think he had some persuasive words.

**Did you meet your wife at AUC?**

Yes, I did. My wife got to AUC as a result of going to camp meeting. There she met Mrs. Rochelle Philmon Kilgore. Mrs. Kilgore was the one who brought my wife to Atlantic Union College. I met Veda there the first year she was at college. In fact, I met her on an Ingathering trip. We used to go around to bars and restaurants two by two. On a trip to New York City she and I happened to be in the same Ingathering band and that was how we met.

**How did you propose to her?**

Well, I went to visit her home in Corning, N.Y. I visited her there after we had been dating for eight or nine months, and I simply asked her if she wanted to be a minister's wife. She responded positively; that was 38 years ago.

**How about your daughters?**

I have two daughters. Eileen lives at home in an apartment and she works at the General Conference in the health and temperance department as customer service representative. She deals with Smoking Sam and all the narcotic education materials. She is a registered nurse with a bachelor's degree from Walla Walla. My other daughter is Martha Keough, married to Alger. He is a pastor, and at the present time, in the trust services work in the Pennsylvania Conference. They live up near Pittsburgh. She is also a nurse, graduated from Walla Walla. They have three

children, Ryan, Ann Marie and Jeffrey, ages six to nine.

**You have been a pastor, mission director, academy principal, professor of religion, division secretary, associate secretary of the General Conference Sabbath School department and most recently, general vice president of the General Conference. That's quite a varied career. How do you see yourself?**

I took the ministerial course at AUC and I have always considered myself basically to be a minister; whether I was pastoring, or teaching, or editing, or administering, I have done it as a minister of the Seventh-day Adventist church. I began my career in northern New England as a pastor. We lived in Vermont; our children were born in Burlington. We then moved from Vermont to Maine, and spent 10 years in that area. At that point we received a call to mission service and went to the old Middle East Division. We lived in Lebanon and Egypt. On our return to the United States, I taught at Atlantic Union College before going to the General Conference, but it was all ministry in a variety of ways.

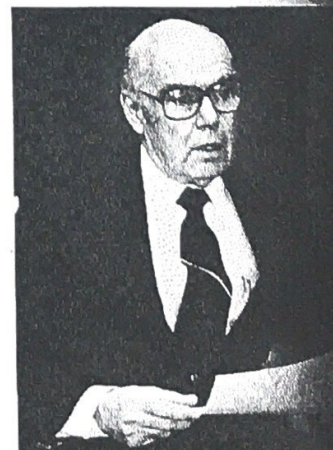
**Did you learn to speak one of the middle-eastern languages while you were there?**

I learned some Arabic. I think it would be presumptuous for me to say that I learned to speak Arabic, but I know some, and I can still get a taxi or go to the market. I went there first as a

mission director and then became principal of the Nile Union Academy; in fact, I was visiting again at that campus just recently, and paid a visit to Cairo.

**How do you feel your career to date has prepared you to be president of Andrews University?**

Well, of course Andrews is a Seventh-day Adventist institution, and in some general sense I suppose any position that gives a person a working knowledge of the church and its institutions prepares one for future assignments, whatever they may be. Those that more specifically relate to my work here at the university would be my work as a principal; regardless of the size of the school there are certain aspects of it that are the same, just on a different scale. Then I was involved as an educational secretary with the Middle East Division, where we evaluated the work of the college as well as the academies and local schools. When I returned to the United States I taught at Atlantic Union College; while there I was a pastor and teacher and also was involved with administration of the college. I believe all of these things have helped provide an insight into what an Adventist institution of higher learning is and how it functions. Of course, at the General Conference part of my assignment as general vice president has been to coordinate the curriculum of the seminaries





throughout the world. Also the work of biblical research is usually work with the scholars in the church. We had representatives on the biblical research committee from each college and university in North America. I have thus become well acquainted with the organization and administration of the church in general.

**What do you think is your most important asset here?**

The most important asset of the university certainly has to be the faculty that has been assembled. When you don't have a faculty you don't have any university. If you disperse the faculty it can take years to build

**How long have you been a member of the Andrews Board of Trustees and how long have you been on the Board of Trustees for two years now, but you probably still feel you have a lot to learn. How do you plan to learn about doing that?**

The way is the approach I've taken so far—to meet the people I'll be working with. I spent most of yesterday visiting with the new presidents, and there were some other people between times that I talked with. They were no less important in their particular way. Also, there are quite a few documents that accumulate in the university. You can learn a great deal about the institution by reading

these. For instance, the constitution and the faculty handbook, the master plan, and the trustees' minutes. These are the first steps.

**Some people observed with pleasure that you and your wife ate lunch in the university cafeteria yesterday, your first day on campus. What did you learn about Andrews from doing that?**

I have eaten there many times, so it wasn't a new experience, except that my wife happened to be with me. However, during the lunch hour I had the privilege of meeting some of the students that were there who were very friendly and open.

**Do you plan to continue doing that?**

To the extent that the family budget allows me. After all, the president can't eat free in the cafeteria.

**What do you see as the most important task that lies ahead of you?**

I suppose the first things we need to look at are the spiritual aspect and unity of the university. It seems to me that if you have a correct spiritual tone, both among the staff and the students, and there is a sense of unity, of pulling together, that in one stroke you get rid of many of the problems. I think that would be my first priority

—to bring about that unity, to bring about a spiritual tone. Not that there hasn't been, but it's the kind of thing that's not done once and for all; it's an ongoing process. I think that is one element of it—the unity—the sense of belonging.

**Do you have some specific ways that you think might bring that about?**

Well, I think there will be opportunities to speak to various groups on campus. That is one of the main ways a president has of reaching people, whether faculty or student groups or worship groups.

**As this unifying is going on, what would you see as the next task you would begin to spend some time on?**

Besides these overall general tasks, you get down to just the nitty gritty of the academic program and the budget. The thing that is most pressing at this moment is the budget; I don't mean the production of this year's budget, I mean the financial condition of the institution in general. It is quite a challenge to know the direction that the university ought to take financially. I think as a part of this sense of unity there has to be some understanding on the part of the faculty and staff what the real situation is regarding the finances of the institution. So I think that those two things are tied together; you can't leave out the problems when you are seeking unity. You have to appeal to people to unite when the institution is facing difficulties.

**So that means informing the faculty and staff about what is happening.**

They will have to be informed; and they will be solicited for their suggestions on the direction we should take. I don't think that the office of president qualifies a person to determine what direction a university is going to take. It is a corporate adventure and various groups and individuals are going to have to give input; both for the knowledge they have and for their sense of working together.

**The majority of the readers of FOCUS are alumni. What is your view of the role of alumni?**

Well, alumni go back many years. There has been a great deal of change over the years here. One thing important for alumni is to keep up with what's happening on campus; not maybe in so many of the day to day things, but knowing the direction the school is going and the growth that takes place in students, faculty and the physical plant. If a person is interested in the university, it seems to me this is one way that he can show it. The other thing, of course, is that a university needs the financial support of its alumni. In my view BECA is an excellent way for alumni and businessmen to work together, matching their dollars, for the benefit of Adventist education. And, of course, alumni can contribute to the sense of unity on occasions when they visit campus and in the kinds of reports they carry away from the campus about what is happening here.

