The SDA Theological Seminary: Heading Toward Isolation?

By Gary Land

In August 1986 the Board of Trustees of Andrews University set up a seminary executive board. That action culminated a series of distinct changes in faculty and curriculum that has profoundly transformed the SDA Theological Seminary from an academic to a professional school. Instead of a community of exploration it has become an instrument of conservation.

Since the seminary educates most of the Adventist ministers in North America, it is influential in the life of the church. Because of this influence the church as a whole, not just theologians, should understand what has been happening within the seminary over the past 25 years. More specifically, the membership should realize the significance of little-noticed but radical changes made in the critical 1983-1987 school years.

The heart of a seminary, as with any school, is its faculty. While students come and go, the faculty provides continuity and stability in programs and atmosphere. Increasingly the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary is being staffed by faculty who have little or no academic experience outside of the Adventist environment.[1] This trend should be a matter of concern. It is bound to increase the isolation of Adventist pastors and teachers from the rest of society, and the church may well find itself capable of talking only to itself.

The early seminary bulletins emphasized the quality of the faculty, describing it as combining high academic and professional qualifications with a commitment to Jesus Christ. The academic degrees earned by its faculty are an indication of the seminary's concern with quality.

At the time the seminary became fully established at Berrien Springs in the 1960-1961 academic year, 11 of its faculty of 20 had earned doctorates.[2] Steadily, the number of earned doctorates on the faculty increased. From the 11 doctorates (not counting M.D.'s) held by seminary faculty that first year, the figure had improved to 17 by 1965 and 21 by 1975. By 1981, the high point was reached, when 29 of the 35 faculty had earned doctoral degrees. Four years later that ratio had dipped to 26 of 38. (See Figure 1).

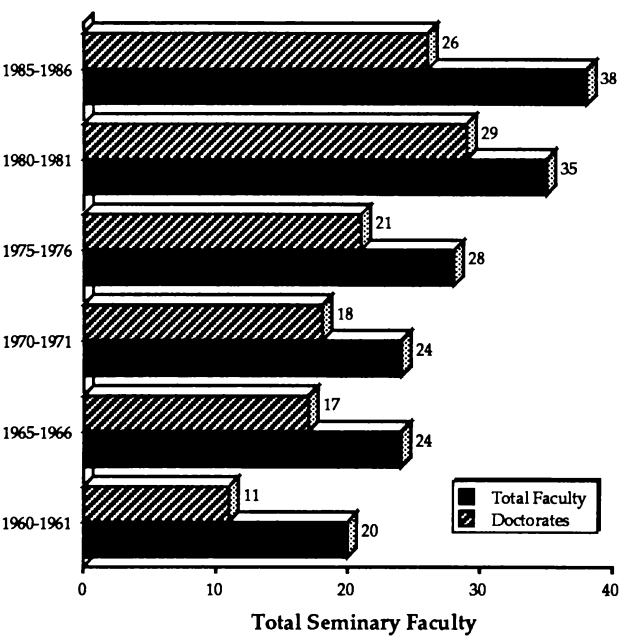

Figure 1

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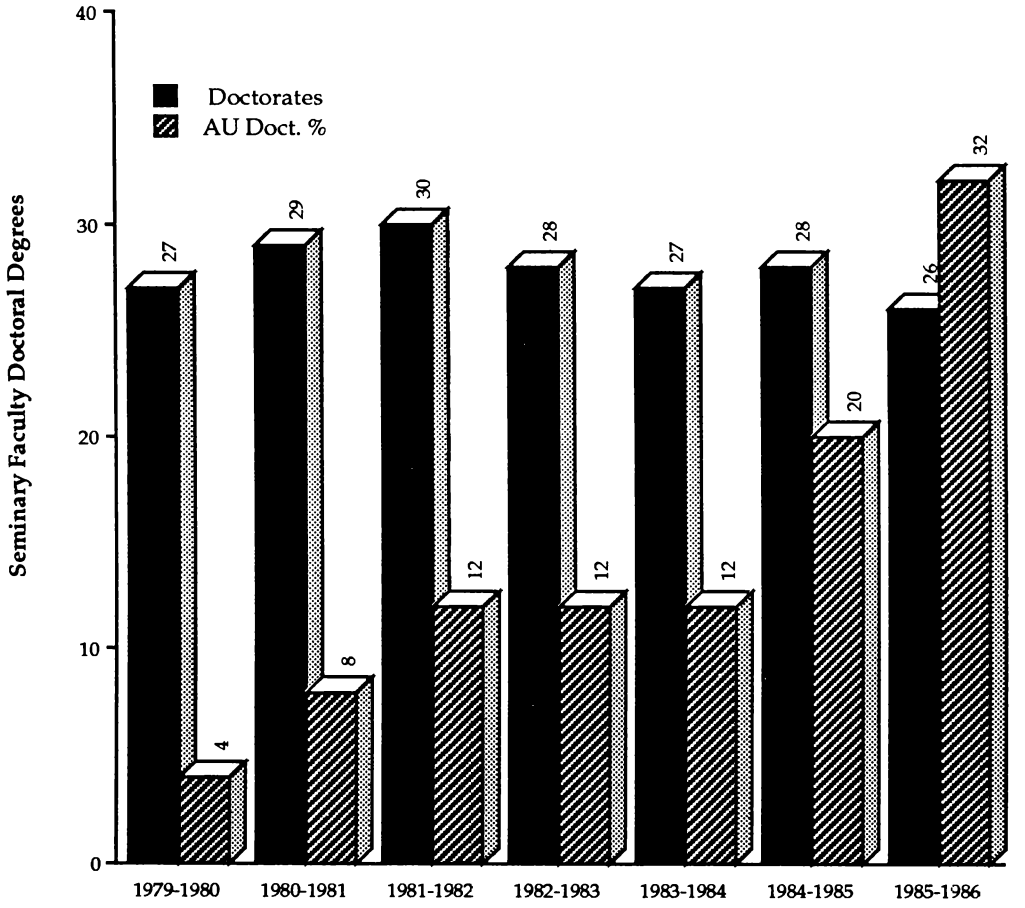
Until 1980, most of these degrees came from prestigious universities in North America and Europe; Chicago, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Geneva, and Basel had provided much of the faculty with its doctoral education. These faculty had come into personal contact with the leading scholars in Biblical studies and theology.

ceived doctorates from Andrews. (Two Th.D.'s, three Ph.D.'s, two D.Min.'s, and one Ed.D.) These figures do not include faculty simultaneously enrolled in doctoral programs at Andrews, sometimes in the same departments to which they had professorial appointments.

The next generation of doctoral students may

Percentage of Seminary Faculty Doctorates from Andrews Compared With Total Number of Seminary Faculty Doctorates



Totals by Year

Figure 2

Accreditation of doctoral degrees by Andrews University presaged a change.[3] In 1979 the school appointed its first faculty member with a degree from Andrews, in this case an Ed.D. (in religious education, a joint program between the seminary and the department—later school—of education). The number of seminary faculty with Andrews degrees steadily increased from that point, until by 1985-1986 eight faculty had re-

have many teachers with only an Adventist academic background. Master of Divinity students will also face the same situation. The challenge to the seminary is to find ways of breaking through the isolation that its recent hiring practices threaten to create.

An indication of this isolation appears in the publication record of the seminary faculty. In years past seminary bulletins devoted consider-

able attention to faculty publications. Seminary professors successfully wrote for non-Adventist publications. But to an increasing extent the seminary faculty publishes for Adventist publications and conferences.[4]

Between 1960 and 1976 the faculty wrote more articles and books for non-Adventist publishers than for the Adventist outlets on their own campus. From 1960 to 1985 the faculty wrote 195 articles for non-Adventist scholarly journals and 31 books for non-Adventist academic publishers. They presented 96 papers at scholarly conferences. During the same period they produced 120 articles for Andrews University's *Seminary Studies* and 15 books for the Andrews University Press.

This production was primarily due to the work of faculty with doctorates earned outside Andrews University. More than half of the articles came from the Old Testament department—Siegfried Horn (Johns Hopkins), Gerhard Hasel (Vanderbilt), Lawrence T. Geraty (Harvard), and William Shea (Michigan). Kenneth Strand (Michigan) in the church history department, wrote 24 of the books.

In six years, 1979-1985, the seminary faculty with Andrews doctorates wrote only four articles in non-Adventist scholarly journals and presented just six papers at academic conferences. . . . Lack of engagement with the non-Adventist scholarly world isolates Adventist scholarship and teaching, and contributes to further isolation of the church at large.

Following 1979, the first year a teacher with an Andrews doctorate was added to the seminary faculty, this group of productive faculty accelerated their writing for non-Adventist scholarly journals. By sharp contrast, in the six years, 1979-1985, the seminary faculty with Andrews doctorates wrote only four articles in non-Adventist scholarly journals and presented just six papers at academic conferences. Otherwise their scholarly work appeared only through *Seminary Studies,* Andrews University Press, and presentations to Adventist groups and General Conference committees.

Lack of engagement with the non-Adventist scholarly world results in isolation of Adventist scholarship and teaching, contributing to further isolation of the church at large.

The Curriculum—Increasingly Professional

The seminary faculty has the primary responsibility of educating ministers of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Although most of the faculty are trained as scholars in such fields as languages, Biblical studies, and theology, church leaders have increasingly sought to make the seminary more practical and less theoretical. As a result, the seminary has experienced throughout its recent history a tension between academic and professional concerns.

This tension has been reflected in its B.D. and M.Div. (which replaced the B.D. in 1972) curricula. In the early 1960s, one quarter of the required courses were devoted to the practical work of the minister ("Applied Theology"). Since the 1983-1984 watershed school year, applied theology comprises more than one-third of the ministerial student's program.

In its early years on the Berrien Springs campus, the curriculum was more like a graduate than professional school program. Its bulletin announced that the seminary sought to develop "habits of sound scholarship in Biblical theology" as well as practical abilities. About one-quarter of the required courses concerned the work of the minister and involved field work. In addition to courses in Old and New Testament, systematic theology, and church history, the program also required a research and bibliography course, and biblical Hebrew. A thesis was offered as an

elective. All students had to take an oral comprehensive examination.

Gradually, changes were made in this curriculum in an effort to make it more professional and less academic. In 1965-1966 the seminary made the comprehensive oral exam optional; two years later it dropped the research and bibliography requirement. Biblical Hebrew disappeared as a requirement in 1970-1971, reappearing as a "recommended elective" in 1973-1974. Meanwhile, world missions became a new and required part of the curriculum.

Beginning in 1970-1971, students were required to spend nine months in ministerial service between their eighth and ninth quarters of residence. The obvious logistical problems of this program led to its replacement in 1975-1976 by the requirement that students spend their first summer quarter in an evangelistic field school. In 1980-1981 the summer field school was replaced by the Institute of Evangelism located in Chicago, at which students spent their ninth quarter. Despite the many changes, the number of credits in applied courses remained approximately one quarter of the program.

The 1983-1984 school year marked the transformation of the seminary curriculum. That year saw the most drastic course changes since the seminary arrived in Michigan from Washington, D.C. In actions barely noticed by the membership at large, the seminary radically restructured its entire curriculum. It was during this year when more than one-third, rather than the previous one-quarter, of the total program was devoted to practical courses and "hands-on" training.

M.Div. students were required to take colloquia in such subjects as "Building Community in Church Life," "Youth Ministry," and "Church and Society," as well as six quarters of "Pastoral Formation," a program where students were assigned duties at various area churches under the supervision of seminary professors. Students were also required to take additional courses in the Church and Ministry department and the ninth quarter Institute of Evangelism. The requirement in world mission remained the same.

The traditional requirements in New and Old Testament, Theology and Christian Philosophy, and Church History were reduced. They were supplemented by required courses in Salvation, Law-Covenant-Sabbath, and Eschatology.

The Board— Increasingly Restricted

The adoption of a more practically oriented curriculum, and the hiring of the seminary's own doctoral students were responses to a denominational leadership that had long been uncertain of the seminary's value. To the leaders the curriculum seemed too academic and some professors too liberal. In the 1970s, there had been an attempt to draw up statements on various articles of belief that professors would have to sign, but that effort came to a dead end in the face of widespread opposition.

Then, in the wake of the 1980 Glacier View conference on Desmond Ford, voices arose pushing to make the seminary an independent institution more directly under the control of the General Conference. Although little was said publicly, rumors of these calls for an independent seminary spread widely.

According to public statements by Richard Lesher, president of Andrews University, to the Andrews faculty on February 23, 1987, the pressure for an independent seminary grew to such a point that he offered to the university board of trustees in August 1986 a compromise plan. He proposed a seminary executive board technically responsible to the larger board but—as originally formulated—including individuals who were not full members of the university board. At its February 1987 meeting, the Andrews University board revised this plan so that only full members of the board, including some laypersons, served on the seminary executive board. Its subordinate role to the AU board was clarified.

In the face of considerable criticism of the new executive board, Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, explained in February 1987 that many denominational leaders believed there

were too many layers of administration between the world field and the seminary. Church leaders feared that the seminary would experience a dilution of purpose and mission if it stayed within the academic context of the university. Through the compromise arrangement of the seminary executive board, the advantages of remaining in an academic setting would be retained while at the same time the seminary would be more closely tied to the world field. The seminary, in Wilson's view, is of special concern to the church leadership because it is an example to the world church; it is expected to be a defender of the faith against "cultural Adventism," with its threat to dilute church doctrine and practice. The General Conference, in short, had turned away from its 1960 actions that made the seminary part of a university with one integrated board (prior to 1960 there had been an attempt at having two boards and two administrations at Berrien Springs).

The significance of the new governing arrangement for the seminary is the culmination of changes in the faculty and curriculum that make the seminary more of a conserving rather than an exploring institution. As the experience in the 1970s of the Missouri Synod Lutheran denomination and its Concordia Seminary reveals, the tension between the conserving and exploring roles exists for any church-related educational institutions, particularly seminaries. Perhaps Seventh-day Adventism can only accept a seminary that is a conservor and an apologist for the faith. But can the faith be adequately presented if the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary becomes too isolated from both the larger Christian community and the society to which Adventists witness?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Of course, holding a degree from a prestigious institution does not guarantee that one will be a good teacher or scholar. Simply because Andrews University cannot be classed as one of the great universities of the country does not mean that it cannot produce scholars and teachers whose quality equals those who come from such places as Harvard and the University of Chicago.

2. In addition there was one M.D. (a part-time teacher) and one honorary D.D. (conferred by the seminary). The number of faculty fluctuated considerably during the next 12 years until it stabilized at 31-32, with some minor variations, beginning in 1973. Its next period of growth started in 1979-1980 when there were 36 faculty, a figure that grew, again with some fluctuations, to 38 in 1985-1986.

Throughout this time there were always one to three physicians who taught part-time and between 1982-1983 and 1984-1985 the faculty had a musician who was a half-time appointment. Thus the full-time faculty was always somewhat smaller than the total faculty.

See *Andrews University Bulletin: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary 1960-1961—1984-1986* (Berrien Springs, Michigan).

3. A few years previously, Andrews University had received accreditation for doctoral programs in the Department of Education and the Theological Seminary. The seminary then introduced the D.Min. (1973), the Th.D. (1974), and the Ph.D. (1983).

4. The numbers presented here are only a rough approximation, for not all publications and papers are reported to the university administration for inclusion in the reports of faculty publication. Such items as encyclopedia and dictionary entries have been counted as articles. Beyond this, some judgments had to be made by the author as to what constituted a scholarly publication. Another researcher might count these works somewhat differently, but the results are likely to vary only slightly. See *Faculty Publications of Andrews University*, Vols. 1-5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1976-1986).