

SCHOLARS DISCUSS “ELLEN WHITE FOR TODAY,” CALL FOR CHANGE

Twenty scholars spent the weekend of October 22 discussing how to restore the influence of Ellen G. White, prophetic writer, preacher, and “founding mother” of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Meeting in an archival center at Pacific Union College, the conference was organized under the motto “Misuse does not take away proper use.”

Participants included five former college presidents, the former dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, three biographers of Ellen White, and several students of her writing process. The conference ended by recommending clarification in the Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. The group also issued a document entitled “Ellen White for Today: An Appeal,” which declared that the church faced a “crisis” that called for new approaches.

In their “Appeal,” this group of experienced scholars and administrators stated: “It is urgent for us to listen anew to Ellen White, using everything we have learned about her humanity, her historical context, her literary sources, and her spiritual development to create a better understanding of her ministry.”

Discussion leaders at the conference included the following men and women:

- George Knight, author of *Ellen White’s Afterlife* and numerous other books, talked about how new evidence had changed his judgments.

- Donald R. McAdams, author of *Ellen White and the Historians*, suggested creative ways for denominational leaders to respond to research about Ellen White's sources.
- Denis Fortin, Seminary professor and co-editor of *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, shared how historical analysis of White's work would not necessarily undermine her work's devotional power.
- Larry Geraty, retired president of La Sierra University, and Ron Graybill, retired teacher and former associate at the Ellen G. White Estate, offered possible revisions to the denomination's official statements on spiritual gifts.
- Gilbert Valentine, author of *The Prophet and the Presidents*, reflected on Ellen's White temperament in the light of newly available sources.
- Two current biographers of Ellen White, Jonathan Butler and Terrie Aamodt, prompted discussion on the Adventist prophet's evolving leadership, including the impact of Victorian ideas of "woman's roles" on her ministry.
- Paul McGraw, academic dean at Hong Kong Adventist College, discussed Ellen White as a "prophetic homilist."
- Katharine Van Arsdale of the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University described the dramatic impact of artificial intelligence on Ellen White studies.

As the conference came to end, the participants sought to remind the wider public of what was at stake: "Just as it is impossible to envision American democracy without Jefferson and Lincoln or to understand the Reformation without Luther, we affirm that the Advent

movement will weaken its witness about Creation, the Sabbath, righteousness by faith, or the 'Blessed Hope' if we ignore Ellen White, and God's leading in our founding."

This statement was supported by everyone at the conference. In addition to the discussion leaders mentioned above, these included Niels-Erik Andreasen, retired president of Andrews University; Kendra Haloviak Valentine, New Testament professor at La Sierra University; Warren Trenchard, former provost at La Sierra University; Karl Wilcox, director of the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History; Jim Walters, retired ethicist at Loma Linda University; Laura Wibberding, professor of church history at Pacific Union College; and Eric Anderson, president emeritus of Southwestern Adventist University (and conference moderator).

The conference was sponsored by gifts from Napa Valley Community Foundation, *Spectrum* magazine, and Dr. Tim Bainum. Most discussions were held in the Scholars' Reading Room of the Walter Utt Center.