



Walla Walla Religion Faculty Under Fire

How the religion faculty at Walla Walla College has come under fire, and what the board is doing about it.

by Rosemary Bradley Watts

The special committee appointed to examine the Walla Walla School of Religion will announce its recommendations at the November meeting of the college board. Appointed May 5, the nine-member committee, composed of members of the board of trustees (see "Board Appoints Committee to Examine WWC School of Religion," *Spectrum*, Vol. 26, No. 2), was charged with the responsibility of finding ways to bring together the college theology department and the wider Adventist community. Jere Patzer, president of the North Pacific Union Conference, and W. G. Nelson, president of Walla Walla College, agreed that the committee would be allowed the widest latitude and flexibility in its work. The committee itself selected Bryce Pascoe as its chair. Committee members face a daunting task, requiring a

familiarity with years of misunderstandings, rumors, and the occasional outright falsehood.

The Walla Walla College faculty of religion is widely recognized as one of the most respected and well-credentialed in Adventism. Its members regularly publish articles and books. Several, including John Brunt and Alden Thompson, have had books reviewed by reading committees, published by Adventist publishing houses, and circulated through the Adventist Book Centers. Their ideas have hardly been kept secret, including Thompson's views on the nature of Scripture. Over a period of years, Thompson's work, in particular, has prompted vigorous discussion and criticism. However, it wasn't until Jere Patzer became president of the North Pacific Union Conference and chair of the Walla Walla College board, in 1996, that criticisms of Walla Walla's school of religion coalesced and received official attention in denominational and college committees.

Rosemary Bradley Watts, a graduate of Atlantic Union College, served for several years as an assistant editor at the Adventist Review. She now lives in Richland, Washington, where, until her recent retirement, she worked as an editor and writer.

Patzer came to the union presidency by way of the Upper Columbia Conference, where he served for 11 years as president. During his tenure in Upper Columbia, Patzer took steps to distance himself, ceremonially and substantively, from Walla Walla College. He did not invite the chair of the school of religion to observe the monthly conference executive committee meetings, thereby breaking a long-standing precedent. He did not invite faculty to speak at the annual Upper Columbia Conference camp meetings, held on the college campus, nor did he invite them to speak at the pastors' meetings. On those rare occasions that he attended the annual weekend of meetings when the faculty of religion met with the conference presidents in a relaxed atmosphere of study and fellowship, he typically stayed for just a few hours. When Patzer became chair of the Walla Walla College board, he again broke precedent by rescinding the standing invitation to the theology department chair to observe the union executive meetings. This was a doubly curious thing to do, since any church member in the union may, by constitution, observe the open meetings.

Nevertheless, the faculty of religion was taken by surprise when, in the early part of 1997, what had seemed like random attacks began to resemble a full frontal assault. Just five months after Patzer became union president, an October 12, 1996, meeting provided the catalyst.

The Walla Walla College alumni association had been planning the meeting for more than a year. It was intended to draw alumni from throughout the Spokane, Washington, area. School of religion faculty were an obvious choice to represent the college: The department is one of which the school is proud, and the faculty's Sabbath Seminars had yet to visit the Spokane area. Flyers went out under the headline, "Why I Am a Seventh-day

Adventist, by the Walla Walla College School of Theology Faculty," and listed among the questions for discussion, "What is it that keeps professional theologians in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?" and "How might we, professional or not, help shape a vision of the SDA Church of the future?"

Each of the faculty members had preached a morning sermon; however, they understood this afternoon meeting to be a time for personal testimony—for discussion of individual journeys and commitment to Adventism. The Spokane Area Ministers Association (SAMA), however, saw the flyer and took it to mean that faculty members were finally coming to address presumably widespread theological concerns. As one pastor put it, "Some of us had heard they were teaching stuff that wasn't even Christian, so this would give us a chance to hear them clear the air and set the record straight."

Those who attended with this purpose in mind were, no doubt, disappointed. Darold Bigger spoke of the Advent hope in the context of his daughter's tragic murder, and Bruce Johanson told the story of returning to the church after leaving it years before. Others spoke of the Creator and the importance of joyous Sabbathkeeping. In the discussion period after the presentations, faculty members fielded questions about what made them peculiarly Adventist; one listener wanted to know if the church still believes the Catholic Church is the Beast (as announced in the Spokane *Spokesman Review* some weeks before). Responses were subdued and philosophical. Everyone was tired after a long day. Although audience response was uniformly positive, when asked about the event, Ernest Bursey, professor of New Testament, chuckled. "It wasn't terrible, but it was not our finest hour."

The two pastors from the Spokane area who attended the meeting evidently agreed. One week after the meeting, the president of SAMA, Richie Pries, who had not attended,

called the members of SAMA together to listen to a tape of the afternoon meeting, and to air concerns about where the faculty fell in mainstream Adventism. The faculty's failure to mention any of Adventism's "distinctive doctrines" in responding to questions about what made them uniquely Adventist was particularly disturbing.

After seeking counsel from "higher up"—a source close to the story, who spoke on condition of anonymity, affirmed that this meant from the General Conference—the members of SAMA drafted an eight-page letter of complaints, accompanied by a marked-up transcript of the question-and-answer period of the October 1996 meeting. The letter was addressed to Patzer, with copies to Elders Alfred McClure, president of the North American Division; Robert Folkenberg, president of the General Conference; and W. G. Nelson, president of Walla Walla College. When asked what he hoped to accomplish by sending the letter, Pries responded, "I want to know if the members of the staff believe the world was created in six 24-hour days. I want to know where they stand on the providential rise of the Adventist Church. Is it just a sociological thing or genuinely led by God? [I want to know] where . . . they stand on the 2300 days and 1844? Can we be passionate about preaching it or do we have to sort of apologize for it?" When asked whether he had voiced his concerns to members of the faculty, he replied, "No, they are the teachers, and I am the student." His responsibility lay elsewhere. "I have no authority to talk with them," he said, "and I took it to those who have authority over them."

"Could someone get fired as a result of this process? I can't make a guarantee that it couldn't happen. My sentiment is that we're a long way past that."

—W. G. Nelson, President
Walla Walla College

One administrator in the North Pacific Union began collecting and studying the doctoral dissertations of the faculty members, with an eye toward the "Rio Statement" of 1986, which declared the historical-critical method of Scriptural study unacceptable for Adventist scholars.

At the Upper Columbia Conference pastors' meeting, a vaguely worded letter was drafted, urging the board to note that the undersigned held "deep concerns" about the college. Forty-two individuals signed the letter. Though addressed to members of the board, it was sent only to Patzer, McClure, and Folkenberg.

Jim Reinking, an evangelist who circulated the letter for signatures, was untroubled by this, and explained that it had been sent only to Patzer, chair of the board, so that "his hand could be strengthened in dealing with the deep concerns."

Sensing an impending crisis, W. G. Nelson urged a meeting of union officials and the religion faculty. The union administration prepared for the meeting by arranging a teleconference with Richard Davidson, chair of the department of Old Testament at the SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University; Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, a doctoral student at the seminary; George Reid (director), Angel Rodriguez, and William Shea, of the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute; and the presidents of conferences in the North Pacific Union. During the meeting, the administrators were briefed on research into the contents of the dissertations written by Walla Walla College religion faculty members.

On January 23, 1997, Patzer convened a meeting of the conference presidents; the union treasurer, Bryce Pasco, the union secre-

tary; and Bill Knott, pastor of the college church; with Nelson and members of the faculty of religion. Conference and union administrators took up most of the meeting voicing a variety of concerns about the entire faculty of religion. One conference president even made an apparently offhanded reference to a party, attended by members of the religion faculty, where alcoholic beverages were consumed. Subsequent to the meeting, the rumor was traced to a 1994 birthday party for Beverly Beem, chair of the English department and then head elder of the college church. When her pastor, Bill Knott, mistook bottles of Martinelli's sparkling apple cider and Rothschild's sparkling grape juice for wine, he reported his consternation directly to Patzer. (Knott later acknowledged his error and apologized to members of the faculty.)

Meanwhile, religion faculty began feeling concretely the displeasure of the North Pacific Union administrators. Alden Thompson's regular column in the union news magazine, the *Gleaner*, was canceled because of alleged budgetary constraints. An advertisement featuring Pedrito Maynard-Reid's picture was pulled from the *Gleaner* for unspecified reasons. Ernest Bursey offered to cancel a speaking engagement at the Washington Conference camp meeting, in the interest of avoiding embarrassment to conference officials; his offer was accepted. Taken together, these actions lent weight to the rumors that were circulating about the crisis at the school of religion.

Ironically, the rumors themselves may have served to calm the frenzy. As people became aware of the variety of allegations and threats circulating, more came forward to express their support for the religion faculty. At the annual Alumni Homecoming Banquet, Dr. Bruce Hamm, of Moscow, Idaho, took everyone by surprise when he presented a

\$25,000 check to Nelson, along with an impassioned speech praising the faculty of religion and designating the funds (collected from alumni) for their exclusive and unrestricted use. During the Sabbath sermon, Dan Mathews, director and host of *Faith for Today*, expanded on the weekend theme of "Friends" by describing how Christian friends should behave, particularly when involved in disputes. Many took it as a gentle rebuke to the parties involved in the dispute surrounding the religion faculty. At the Sunday morning business meeting of the alumni association, members unanimously voted a specific action voicing their complete support for the Walla Walla College religion faculty and administration.

By the time the college board finally met on May 5, 1997, many thought the meeting would be anticlimactic. Several earlier meetings had aggressively addressed some of the more specific concerns. But the meeting was far from mild. At one point, a board member veered from discussion of the faculty of religion to charge that a sociology textbook contained "pornography," and to present proof. It seems the book included information on rape. It was a poor note on which to end.

When the board went into executive session, faculty members were startled to learn that John Brunt, vice-president for academic affairs, and Manford Simcock, vice-president for finance, both of whom regularly participated in executive sessions, were dismissed. Again, though, voices of support were heard. While the board was in executive session, students circulated a statement affirming support for the faculty of religion. They collected 400 signatures, and presented them to Nelson. Before dispersing, the board took action, forming the nine-member committee currently examining the school of religion.

At a meeting with the faculty that night, Patzer and Nelson both described the results of the board meeting as "amorphous." In

addressing questions after the opening statements, Patzer was conciliatory. "Administrators and pastors are the same," he said; "academics are different—no question." Nonetheless, he affirmed that all three groups shared similar goals, and acknowledged the groundlessness of many of the rumors: "We all want to strengthen the church in the Northwest," he said, and continued, "Had discussions happened over the last 10 years, we wouldn't be where we are now."

After Patzer left the faculty meeting for another appointment, Nelson struck a hopeful note. "Could someone get fired as a result of this process?" he asked rhetorically. "I can't make a guarantee that it couldn't happen. My sentiment is that we're a long way past that. I don't know what to tell you except this: The very first thing that would happen is that

they'd have to come back with a recommendation. . . . There would have to be some basis to that recommendation, and in fact [there are] legal specifications as to how we deal with things in our office. . . . The substance of that fact would have to have been substantiated. We have due process."

"We've come a long way," Nelson continued. "The only thing I can tell you is that I believe in the goodwill of the people. I believe they are committed to looking at more than simply the issue of a particular person. Beyond that, my real expectation is that what they will come back to us and do is to say, 'We think there are some statistics in the constituency about certain issues.' I can conceive that they will tell us how they believe that communication could be set up to avoid these problems in the future."