Adventist ministers in the making

by Barry Oliver

Report to the 'shareholders' on preparation for ministry at Avondale College

AN ARTICLE IN the *Record* of May 14 1994, Pr Graeme Scott, pastor of the Toronto (NSW) Church, quoted as follows:

> Our church has unequivocally been blessed by having the [Avondale theology] students participate at Toronto... I welcome the opportunity to assist students by integrating them into the church's life. It helps them get their feet on the ground to get the feel of church ministry. Avondale College is to be commended for the program—it is of immense benefit to the student and the church.

Steve Green, a ministerial student who was assisting Pastor Graeme Scott in the Toronto Church, had this to say about his training:

The opportunity to be involved in ministry while completing my degree has enabled me to hone my skills in a practical and meaningful way. It means that when I graduate I'll be better prepared for the daily rigours of ministry. It gives me greater confidence as I approach my future role as a church pastor.

These comments and many others like them are the perceptions of people who have experienced first hand the effectiveness of the comprehensive ministerial training process at Avondale. They recognise that it is working because it provides a balance of mental stimulation in the classroom, opportunity for reflection in private study, and supervised ministerial practice in the local churches. It is a program that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific should greatly appreciate.

But we seem to have a problem. There are too many who are more than willing to criticise the college and the theology department. While we welcome constructive criticism from loyal critics, it appears that much of the criticism comes from a position of igno rance. Unfortunately, those of us who are currently serving in the Theology Department at Avondale almost never hear such criticism first hand. Too often we have to hear rumours of 'what's happening at Avondale' second-and third-hand. Almost always, rumours are circulated without anyone's approaching us to check on the facts or ask our perspective.



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This article is being written, therefore, in order to provide a sketch of the professional ministerial training program at Avondale College. I hope that it will assist readers to become aware that the process of preparation for ministry at Avondale offers students the best opportunity to develop into effective clergy for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific.

An integrated program

It should be pointed out, at the outset, that it is somewhat artificial to divorce the professional or practical training for ministry from the theoretical or theological aspects of the course. One of the strengths of the Avondale BA (Theol) degree is that it is integrative in nature. Many ministerial training programs conducted by other Christian denominations offer a three-year degree in theology followed by a one-year di-ploma in ministry. It is therefore implied that theology and ministry are separate entities. In contrast, our BA (Theol) insists that preparation for ministry is a comprehensive process which encourages and enables continuous dialogue between theory and practice at each stage of ministerial formation.

In order to ensure that there is appropriate integration of theory and practice, the course has been designed with clear objectives in four key learning areas: Biblical and theological formation; pastoral formation; spiritual formation; and general studies. These broadly-based objectives are listed in course accreditation documentation at the college. They require that in pastoral formation, for example, the student be trained to develop a personal philosophy of ministry; to develop broad-spectrum interpersonal and communication skills; to develop an understanding of human personality development, moral development, and decision-making processes; to minister in diverse situations and environments and cope with intra-personal and environmental change; to develop personal strategies for pastoral evangelism in the local church; and to work within the social structures which relate to marriage and the family and to acquire those skills which enable constructive resolution of problems of dysfunctional relationships.

The development of spirituality as preparation for ministry is receiving a higher profile than previously. Specifically, the objectives for spiritual development are that the student should: develop an understanding of individual spirituality and its relation to cognitive, and personality development; develop an appreciation for the role of the spiritual disciplines in the life of the pastor and the church; practise a fulfilling, personal spirituality; worship in a personally and culturally appropriate and fulfilling manner; and be supported in a mentor-student relationship which can facilitate spiritual development.

One cannot read the comprehensive list of objectives, some of which we have just referred to, without becoming aware of the considerable task that the faculty members of Avondale assume when they engage in the preparation of ministers for the church. These objectives cover cognitive, attitudinal, relational, spiritual and professional development. It is not easy to bring all these categories together in a comprehensive process. But it is proving itself successful. That this learning process does contribute to considerable growth and development can be attested by any faculty member who has had the privilege of working with students as they traverse the course.

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Aspects of professional preparation

But just how are these objectives being met? For the purposes of this discussion, I will divide professional preparation for ministry into four key areas: personal development, pastoral development, evangelistic development, and the development of contextual awareness. In this section I will provide a list of some of the things that are being done to assist our students to meet some of the objectives listed above.

Personal development

The Theology Department has prepared a document which sets out some 'personal development processes' that can be of assistance to the student. No person should attempt to function in professional ministry who does not have a developing concept of self and spirituality. Written philosophy statements which aim to stimulate reflection and self-awareness, and the development of interpersonal, pastoral, and evangelistic skills are required. Various assessment instruments are offered to the student for his/her personal assessment and development in the fourth and seventh semesters of the course. It should be noted that these assessments are confidential and are not available to employing bodies, or to members of the Theology Department other than the individual administering the assessment instrument.

Periodically, during the course, students are encouraged to reflect on their developing spirituality and consult with lecturers and peers. Consultation and reflection assist the student to prepare a personal profile and resumé in preparation for employment. Each student is assigned a faculty adviser who is available to that student (and his/her spouse) for consultation and counsel. Faculty advisers

listen to the student presenting sermons and Bible studies in the third year of the course.

Pastoral development

Pastoral development takes place in the classroom environment and in the workplace—the local church. In the classroom, the student learns the skills of interpersonal relationships, listening skills, counselling skills, visiting skills, mediating skills, leadership skills, chairmanship, and crisis intervention. Subjects address marriage and family processes, cross-cultural ministry, communication and preaching proficiency (3 subjects), stewardship and financial management, church administration, youth ministry, SDA health philosophy and practice, the theology and practice of worship, etc. A chaplaincy practicum is conducted at Sydney Adventist Hospital in the last semester of the student's study program.

In his/her local church, under the supervision of the pastor and church leadership team, the student is able to observe the functioning of a church first hand. Students are expected to accept church office, be involved in all the responsibilities that the office requires, attend meetings, lead out in Sabbath School lesson discussions, youth activities, etc. Most students are preaching at least 20-30 times in a church before they leave college. This experience cannot be duplicated in the classroom. But it does impact on the quality of learning that takes place in the classroom and the quality of development which takes place in the student.

Evangelistic development

Seventh-day Adventists have an unwavering commitment to evangelism. It is to be expected that this commitment will be strongly evidenced in its ministerial training program. That such is the case is demonstrated again in the classroom and in the field education processes. In the classroom, subjects in Seventh-day Adventist mission and evangelism give a theological and practical introduction to the student. Study of the gospel commission, the incarnational nature of the ministry of Christ, spiritual gifts and the three angels' messages helps to provide a comprehensive model for evangelistic practice—a model which includes fellowship, service, justice, development and proclamation. Laboratory sessions in which the students gain experience in preparing and presenting Bible studies are conducted in the second semester of the third year.

In the field and in association with their local church, students engage in 40 hours of personal evangelism (the majority of which is by door-knocking), conduct a seminar series (*Daniel, Revelation, Prophecy*, or various lifestyle themes) with non-Seventh-day Adventists in attendance, and lead a person to Christ and prepare them for baptism conducting a series of at least 30 Bible studies. These are minimum requirements and most students do more than the minimum. Some still do a considerable amount of literature evangelism just before coming to college or during their course.

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Each year since 1991, senior students in association with theology department lecturers have conducted an evangelistic program in Cooranbong entitled 'New Life Down Under'. When Kenton Godfrey reported on the program in 1993, he observed that it was successful because:

- It depended on the work of the whole church within the community creating positive attitudes to the church and the gospel.
- The audience was drawn from friends, neighbours and associates of Adventists who accompanied them to the program and built on already established trust and friendship.
- It was low cost.
- Media used were varied—music, visuals, drama, seminar, community building, Bible presentation, literature and friendship.
- It was contemporary and appropriate to the group attending and it attracted those in the 25-45 age bracket.
- Those involved attempted to model a genuine Christianity and Adventism.
- It was open. All who attended knew exactly what they were coming to and understood that the objective of the program was to equip the individual to live as an Adventist Christian in Australia.
- Much preparation and prayer and the blessing of the Lord was the formula for success.

While achievements, by Avondale ministerial students, in preparing candidates for baptism should not be a sole basis for measuring the success of our training program, it is of interest to note this feature of our student involvement. For example, during the years 1991-1995 ministerial students prepared 126 adults for baptism. Let it be known that such an involvement sits comfortably within the church's ministerial training program.

Development of contextual awareness

There are many other factors which contribute to good ministerial practice. We may group these factors under the heading 'contex-

tual awareness'. Ministers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church must be able to relate to people and the world around them. They must be like Christ—able to conduct the kind of incarnational ministry that puts them in touch with a broad range of people, issues, and situations. Life's experiences are the best preparation for such ministry. The training process at Avondale provides practicums, excursions and field-based activities in order to facilitate experiential learning.

In addition, the course requires the student to take some subjects which encourage the study of history, language, the arts, and contemporary Australian culture and religion. Students are given opportunity to choose four electives which may be drawn from any accredited degree course on campus—or even off campus if appropriate. Students choose subjects such as ecology, horticulture, physical education, industrial technology, music, etc. The church does not need ministers who are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good.

Post-graduate degree courses

An exciting development has recently occurred at Avondale. Up until the present, Avondale has been offering an MA Religion degree in affiliation with Andrews University. This arrangement has proven beneficial for us and we are grateful for the willingness of Andrews University to provide the opportunity for post-graduate education for our ministers. At the end of 1994 we received word that our application for our own accredited post-graduate courses has been approved. We are now able to offer an MA (Theol) and an MTh. It would take another article to explain these programs. The exciting thing is that Avondale has done some pioneering work in theological education in Australia by carrying our philosophy of integration of theory and practice into our post-graduate programs.

While the MTh is largely a research degree, both MA (Theol) and MTh degrees require an integration of Biblical/theological studies and pastoral/mission studies in the course-work and in the individual subjects which students complete. No one can say, even at post-graduate level, that ministerial training at Avondale does not put our pastors in touch with ministry.

Conclusion

We have endeavoured to paint for you a thumb-nail sketch of what we are doing at Avondale in order to prepare our students for the professional or practical contingencies of ministry. It has been a frustrating exercise to the extent that it is impossible to condense a comprehensive education process into a few words. However, perhaps something has caught your attention or stimulated your interest. We welcome your input. While there are well-developed review processes in place, we recognise that it is possible to overlook areas of considerable importance and are open to your suggestions.

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We can be justly proud of the ministers who are leaving Avondale to serve their God and their church. They, like us, are continuing to grow and develop. They need our continuing support. They are doing the best they know to be everything that God has called them to be. One of them wrote to me recently:

> What do I enjoy most about ministry? It's a real privilege to see people thirsty for the Lord in their lives. I really enjoy sitting down and talking with people, studying the Bible with them, discussing their questions, and seeing them pledge their lives to Jesus Christ. This makes ministry worthwhile because it is evidence that God's Spirit is still working in the world drawing people to Him.
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> What's the greatest worry in ministry? For me it is the fear of people losing their Christian experience and leaving the church. I see this all the time. It's really sad to see folk who have been highly active in the church for many years begin to move to the fringes and out because of some unresolved conflict or because they have neglected their personal relationship with God.
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> What's the greatest need in ministry? A real daily walk with the Lord is the greatest need for all Christians, including ministers, particularly as we are called to bring Christ to people wherever we are. . . I have discovered that when things get really tough, I come through having seen God at work in an altogether new and unexpected way.

It is my hope and prayer that we will continue to see God at work in our ministerial training program at Avondale and that we will assist our students to see God at work for themselves, perhaps in 'altogether new and unexpected ways'.□