

From pediatrics to ministry of teaching: A personal journey

Sara Thompson

Student, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

—interviews—

Wendy Jackson

Lecturer, School of Ministry and Theology, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

Prologue: From many accounts, Wendy Jackson is more than just a Theology lecturer—she is a source of inspiration, a role model, and a friend. If you walk past her office on the top floor of the Turner building, you'll likely find her working cheerfully in her neatly arranged office, or hear her laughter floating down the hallways as she catches up with her students. It seems that Wendy is in her element; surrounded by students and books. But it hasn't always been this way. Recently I had the opportunity to discover more about her journey to ministry.

Sara: Wendy, thanks so much for the opportunity to talk with you. It seems that you are known for being more than just a theology lecturer on the Avondale campus. Why do people say that?

Wendy: I guess that is because this is a second career for me. My calling to teaching and to the ministry has been a rather recent experience, from my 'original' lifelong passion of practising medicine.

Sara: That's quite a change in careers! So you only recently chose to come to Avondale?

Wendy: Yes.

Sara: And that's a Kiwi accent.

Wendy: True, I grew up in New Zealand, but I was actually born just up the road in Kurri Kurri Hospital. My parents were living in Cooranbong at the time. I spent my first two years of schooling at Avondale Primary before moving to Christchurch at the age of 7.

Sara: So Avondale can claim a little credit for your success?

Wendy: Well, sure. I credit family and early schooling with giving me the values that enabled my later achievements in life. Education was always a very strong priority in our family.

Sara: Medicine seems to have been quite a large part of your life. Did you always plan to be a doctor?

Wendy: Back in Form One I had vaguely thought about being a teacher, but never seriously. All through high school I wanted to be a doctor. After completing school in Christchurch, I studied medicine in Auckland. At Uni I took the opportunity to mingle with fellow Christians through campus groups that focused on connecting Christian students. I graduated in 1990, choosing to specialise in paediatrics, and paediatric endocrinology in particular.

Sara: What was it that made you leave medicine?

Wendy: Everything changed after I had worked in medicine for about ten years. One Sabbath I was sitting in church and I saw the sermon was about talents. I sat there and piously thought—'isn't it good, I'm using all my talents. But this was followed almost immediately by an overwhelming impression that God was telling me, "I want you to do something else with your life." I tried to ignore it but the impression came again, "I want you to do something else."

Feeling confused and understandably reluctant to leave my career I began praying that if this was really God's plan, that He would make it clear.

Sara: And did He?

Wendy: Later, after several months of prayer I became convinced that the 'something else' was ministry. I asked for, and received several irrefutable signs which I accepted as confirmation of this. So I began making plans to study theology at Andrews University in Michigan, USA. However, after only one year of my Master of Divinity, out of respect for my parents, who were unhappy with my decision and insisting I take time out to reconsider, I decided to take up a position in Cincinnati Children's Hospital. I completed a Paediatric Endocrine Fellowship there. But I still felt called to the ministry.

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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

Sara: So God's plan was personally compelling, but uncertain for some close to you? Did you feel you were being sidetracked from His plan?

Wendy: I did, but in the end it just included a different route to the same destination, one offering clearer confirmation of His purpose. I took up the role of head elder in my local church, and through this time I came to realise that God had removed my passion for medicine and replaced it with a heart for ministry. However, when my fellowship at the hospital came to an end, I had difficulty renewing the visa I needed to complete my theological study. Immigration lawyers informed me I had less than a 0.1% chance of being granted the visa renewal that would allow continued study in the United States.

Sara: It must have been difficult, dealing with that kind of uncertainty.

Wendy: I prayed, and invited my friends to join me, asking for patience and another confirming sign—specifically that God would grant the visa if He wanted me to continue studying ministry. Despite all the negative predictions, I was again granted a visa. So I continued my study of ministry at Andrews University.

Sara: So, you felt called to study theology, and then ended up teaching at Avondale College? That's yet another change in career direction.

Wendy: Teaching theology was a ministry career path I hadn't foreseen. But Dr. Arthur Patrick, a valued mentor who recently passed away, asked whether I was interested in pursuing an academic career. I told him, "I'm going to have to pray about this before I say yes; I've prayed all the way through this and God's opened and closed doors for me." So I prayed about it, and was impressed that God was saying, "Go ahead and do this." I came into this role feeling like I'm right where God wants me.

Sara: So you're now lecturing in systematic theology; do you feel you have been called to that position?

Wendy: Absolutely. I love what I'm doing, I love the interaction. I still feel completely inadequate, but God somehow works and makes these things happen. Keeping ahead of the students was tough to start with, particularly if one is asked to teach in an area where one hadn't taken more than basic classes. For me, that first semester was 'crazy'. I was totally exhausted, just trying to keep on top of it all! It was difficult, but at the same time, the interaction with the students was really positive from the start.

Sara: You also have the unique position of being the only woman in the department—a daunting task to any woman—particularly for one working in theology, I'd imagine!

Wendy: Daunting perhaps, but I know I am where God wants me. And that makes all the difference.

Sara: So, what's it like? Do you feel like you have a lot of support from your co-workers in this field?

Wendy: That's an easy question! (laughing). I am treated very well. My colleagues are very supportive. While some students are surprised to find a female lecturer in the theology department, most have no problem with it.

Sara: Having personally felt that direct call to ministry, how does this impact your view on women in ministry, and other women who have felt a similar calling?

Wendy: I can relate to those who feel called to lead in a church that has traditionally been led by males only. I think it's very important that the Adventist Church includes women in ministry. I believe God has gifted everybody in the Church, and we should be actively using the talents of both men and women in our churches in whatever way God has gifted them.

Theology is not something I would have done voluntarily. It wouldn't have been on my radar screen to even think about that as a career. I'm not coming to it for any other reason than God said, "This is where I want you right now." And I know there are so many other women in that position.

Sara: I recently noticed that you authored the mission statement for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific, which focuses on *knowing, experiencing, and sharing our hope in Jesus Christ*.

Wendy: What I wanted to do was to suggest that Christianity is not just about a set of beliefs. Knowledge itself is not enough. Unless those beliefs make a difference to the way we live, then what's the point? Christianity involves a relationship, it's lived and experienced, and there's joy involved even when you experience hardship. What's more, we only have something meaningful to share with others when we have personally experienced Jesus and the hope he brings in our own lives.

Epilogue: Dr Wendy Jackson isn't the only one who has experienced God's leading in her life. Whilst most of us may never be called to something as dramatic as a complete career change, perhaps Wendy's story is an opportunity to look deeper into the way God leads in our own lives. May we never get too comfortable to notice God's nudge in another direction! **TEACH**

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