W. W. Prescott: Adventist Education’s Renaissance Man
I t’s sometimes tempting to think that early leaders of the Adventist movement were so sanctified that they served without all the stress and personality conflicts that we now endure. That would be a mistake. Our pioneers were every bit as human as we are. And the issues they faced, if placed alongside our modern struggles, seem eerily similar.

Finding qualified, competent persons to meet the demands of leadership in Adventist education continues to be a growing concern in the North American Division. Academy principal posts stand vacant while search committees vainly winnow through lists of names, relying on retired administrators to fill the gaps in the meantime. Retirees are pulled back into service as colleges and universities struggle to find suitable candidates who will be acceptable to increasingly polarized constituencies. Some overseas divisions face similar dilemmas.

But this challenge is not new. Since the beginning of Adventist education, the denomination has faced the difficulty of finding competent leaders able to help it achieve both spiritual and academic objectives for its schools and colleges. At times, the dearth of leadership has been acute. But somehow leadership emerges, and more often than not, such leadership has been transformational. Such was the case with W. W. Prescott, who for more than 50 years was one of the most significant voices in Seventh-day Adventist education.

Adventist schooling has always been an enterprise of faith. At the end of the first unsteady decade of Adventist education (1872–1882), serious differences over vision and mission emerged at the church’s flagship college in Battle Creek, Michigan. The new venture was almost shipwrecked by a lack of leadership that failed to unite the faculty and adequately address systemic problems.

Then in June 1885, William Warren Prescott of Vermont agreed to take the helm of Battle Creek College. He righted the ship and piloted it into calmer waters—at least for a while. The voyage would not be without its storms and mutinies, but working closely with Ellen White, Prescott was able to reset the compass, strengthen the rigging, and chart a new course for the church’s education system. The fleet of academies and higher educational institutions operated by the Adventist Church in the 21st century, distinguished by their shared mission and ethos, owe a great deal to its first admiral. Today’s educational leaders can learn much from his life and work. ²

**Leadership Vacuum**

In 1882, just a decade after the denomination had established its first college in Battle Creek, church leaders found it necessary to close the school. During the 1883-1884 academic year, the college program went into recess, and the campus sat deserted. Student discipline had become unmanageable. There had been a physical assault during a scuffle between students and a teacher, and factions among students, faculty, and trustees had torn the campus apart. Confusion reigned over the school’s identity and curriculum. What was it meant to be, a liberal-arts college, a trade school with a manual-labor program, or both? Following the shutdown, some dislocated faculty travelled east to establish a new venture at South Lancaster Academy in Massachusetts.³

In order to reopen the following year, the trustees of Battle Creek College recruited the educated but blind pastor W. H. Littlejohn to serve as president. He had recently arrived in Battle Creek to care for the local Adventist congregation. Littlejohn managed the college temporarily while the trustees looked for someone more suitable. They had hoped to persuade a former president, Sydney Brownsberger, to return. Failing that, they tried to recruit Californian W. C. Grainger, who had linked up with the Healdsburg school established the previous year north of San Francisco.

Neither of the two candidates felt attracted to the unique challenges posed by Battle Creek College and its fractious constituency in Michigan, and they declined. Not many principals knew how to design a manual-labor program that would be both economically profitable in the long term and that functioned as part of the formal academic curriculum.⁴ Thus, the blind pastor filled the gap for two years while the trustees continued to search for a long-term leader.

Twenty-nine-year-old Will Prescott proved to be the answer to the college leadership problem when, in the late summer of 1885, he took the helm of the drifting institution. Prescott brought unusual strengths to the role of leadership. A graduate of Dartmouth College (1877) who had also earned a Master of Arts degree, Prescott had been solidly grounded with an education in the classics, followed by three years’ experience as a public school principal in Vermont. At the age of 24, he had ventured into the newspaper business, eventually purchasing a leading publishing establishment in Montpelier, the state cap-

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ital. For five years, he successfully edited a prominent Republican newspaper, becoming prosperous through his endeavors.

When Prescott accepted the presidency of Battle Creek College, money was not the motivating factor. At $700 per year, his beginning denominational pay as president was only a little more than half the salary he had earned six years previously as a fledgling public school principal. More importantly, as the son of a prominent New England Millerite family who had joined the sabbatarians in 1858, Prescott was a committed Adventist. A further plus was his professional background, which had enabled him to move easily among the cultured and distinguished political class in New England.

Prescott wanted to serve the church. His 1885 decision began a 52-year stretch of distinguished contribution to Adventism. During that time, “the Professor” (the common, respectful term by which he was usually addressed) not only helped shape the distinctive contours of Adventist education, but also became one of the most prominent architects of modern Adventism.

From the moment he walked onto the two-building campus with its 300 school desks in September 1885, Prescott’s hands were full. His first tasks involved stabilizing the shaky institution, establishing discipline, clarifying its primary purpose, and ensuring credibility and rigor in its educational program, which embraced elementary, secondary, and college-level work. He focused particularly on strengthening programs for the upper-level students in the college, emphasizing the need for better-educated workers for church service. It took four years to develop programs, a library, and a staff to the point where he felt certain that the school could confidently launch courses that would qualify for academic degrees.

In the meantime, Prescott vigorously promoted the need for educated church workers. He recruited students at camp meetings and church events during his repeated visits across the Midwest and New England. Through his constant preaching, articles in The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, and his agitation on the subject, he became the Adventist icon for quality Christian education. By the time he concluded his presidency at Battle Creek College nine years later (in mid-1894), enrollment had doubled, the physical capacity of the institution had tripled, and the campus boasted a large student residence that, to a significant extent, had been made possible by Prescott’s personal financial resources.

Andrews University’s historian, Emmett K. Vande Vere, refers to the Prescott era as the college’s “golden age.” In addition to strong academics, a formal student residence program had also been established, replete with a “preceptor” and a “preceptress” (similar to today’s residence-hall deans). Prescott’s concept of a student residence hall functioning as a “school home” with a preceptor and a preceptress modeling Christian values and a culture of dignified refinement lasted for decades. The professor and his wife, Sarah, personally set the early pattern at Battle Creek College by living with the students in the residence hall and sharing mealtimes with them in the dining hall.

Implementing a sustainable work-study program proved difficult. Prescott was too busy to get into the printing plant himself, but he understood the dignity of labor. He had grown up in a family with a cottage industry that utilized the labor of every family member. Farming parents, however, resisted the idea of sending their young people off to college to learn a trade or to work with their hands. Students themselves manifested the same lack of interest, and the rural setting for the institution also worked against the concept, frustrating the president and trustees. Success with the manual-training program eluded Prescott, even though he tried several approaches. He found to his chagrin that introducing sports and physical education as an alternative was not without its difficulties, either.

The biggest challenge for Prescott, however, was the launching of “required” Bible classes through a restructuring of the degree curricula. In this, he achieved a major breakthrough. Although the term “integration of faith and learning” was not then in vogue, Prescott certainly comprehended the idea and labored diligently to implement it.

By 1894, the college was at last offering, albeit shakily and imperfectly, what Prescott believed could genuinely be called “Christian education.” But it had not been without a struggle, and it still needed further development. The offering of Bible courses as a required part of the degree curriculum had been strongly opposed by a faction of his faculty and was still somewhat tenuous. Prescott’s battles with his teachers over implementing these reforms had, in fact, involved painful confrontations. He had to call on his board of trustees to strong-arm the faculty in a final push to get the plan adopted. The episode left him rather bruised.

**Leading From the Center**

When Prescott handed over the presidency of Battle Creek College to his successor, George Caveness, he did not do so to go into greener pastures, but so that he could devote his full-time energy to the oversight of an emerging church-wide network of Adventist schools and colleges that he had been nurturing on a part-time basis for the previous seven years.

In the fall of 1887, just two years after Prescott arrived in Battle Creek, the General Conference persuaded him to add to his college president responsibilities the newly created position of education secretary for the General Conference. He reluc-
tantly agreed. Two years later, feeling the excessive weight of carrying both offices, he requested release from the college presidency part of his duties. The request was denied. It was just as well: He had a large capacity for work, and as an experienced leader, he knew how to delegate.

It was in this role as the first secretary of education for the rapidly expanding church from 1887 to 1897 that Prescott was able to shape the educational system we have inherited. He did this in several ways. Working closely with Ellen White as she articulated the broad ideals of Christian education, the professor worked at the cutting edge of implementation, thus establishing a basic “mold” for Adventist colleges. A Christ-centered biblical studies sequence comprised the core of the curriculum. Strong student-residence and student-life programs with a spiritual and service emphasis (daily chapel services and regular “missionary” meetings) supported the curriculum, helping to integrate faith and learning. The primary focus of the institution was to train workers for the church. A geographic location where a strong student work program could be incorporated was also a feature of the “mold.” Graduates of Battle Creek College and the two other colleges Prescott helped establish in the 1890s reproduced the pattern and the ethos at Adventist colleges all over the world as they fanned out in mission service.

As General Conference education secretary, Prescott supervised and coordinated plans for establishing both Union College in Nebraska (1891) and Walla Walla College in Washington state (1892). Getting both institutions established as more widely based regional enterprises (in the days before union conference structures) rather than as local conference operations required the exercise of considerable political skill. Overcoming intense sectional interests proved a challenge. Competition by new schools for available teachers became intense and repeatedly depleted staff resources at Battle Creek College. The shortage of skilled and “spiritually minded” college leadership posed significant challenges.

But because Prescott had the trust of leadership and represented the desired “spiritual” approach to administration, he was pressured into serving as the founding president for the first two years at both Union College and Walla Walla College, in addition to his other duties. Through frequent visits and constant correspondence, he mentored the principals who served under him. No one alleged that he was simply on an ego trip. College trustees were insistent that he establish a right mold.

**Birthing Theological Education**

The spiritual and theological renewal that Prescott personally experienced as a result of the 1888 General Conference ses-
vision in Minneapolis, Minnesota, led to a paradigm shift both in his way of understanding Bible doctrines and in the mission of the Advent movement and its educational program. Prescott came to see that doctrines should be understood Christocentrically and that the preaching of the gospel, rather than law and prophecy, should be the focus and heartbeat of all evangelistic endeavors. He was convinced that every college and school program should reflect this. This new paradigm undergirded his determination to ensure that the formal study of Scripture formed part of each college student’s curricula load every year in an Adventist college.

The fallout Prescott saw and experienced from the theological struggles within the church during the late 1880s and early 1890s as the Advent movement readjusted its focus from a preoccupation with law to an emphasis on righteousness by faith convinced the professor of the need for better theological preparation for the ministry. Deeply concerned over the issue, he raised it with his colleagues in church leadership in late 1888 and was promptly assigned the task of devising and heading up an appropriate program of theological study.16 He consequently organized and secured financing for a series of 20-week fall-winter institutes at headquarters, attended by more than 150 ministers.

The study programs were birthed in the midst of highly charged controversies and disputes about who should and should not teach, and about what should and should not be taught. Former General Conference president George I. Butler protested the new teachings vigorously, but the denominational leaders held their ground. The program continued until 1896, by which time regional colleges had been able to implement a full-scale biblical-studies curriculum for theological education. Prescott thus served not only as the architect of the earliest “seminary” training for the church’s ministry, but also as the sponsor and patron of broad theological and biblical-studies education in the church.17

The church’s college in Australia was another institution established in the Prescott mold as a “model” for other church colleges. During a 10-month stay “down under” from August 1895 to May 1896, Prescott was able to work in close partnership again with Ellen White, a mutually beneficial relationship that helped clarify the church’s educational philosophy and ways it might be implemented.

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Ellen White had hoped Prescott would be elected General Conference president after his return to the United States from Australia in early 1896, but it was not to be. At the 1897 General Conference session, he was assigned to the leadership of the Adventist Church in England. For the next quarter century (starting in 1901), he was involved in a wider arena of administration back at headquarters as a General Conference vice president, editor of The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, founder of the church’s new publishing house in Washington, D.C., and in establishing the new role of field secretary of the General Conference in 1916. This latter role was designed to assist A. G. Daniells as his load became more demanding in the later years of his General Conference presidency.

Prescott’s most notable contribution during this administrative period of his career was his support of Daniells and his leadership in helping to steer the church through the troubled waters of the Kellogg crisis during the first decade of the 20th century. This turbulent period saw Prescott being viewed in quite contrasting ways. John Harvey Kellogg, for example, saw Prescott as an opponent who was “the wildest and most unsafe man that has ever undertaken to pose as a leader of this denomination.”20 However, according to Daniells, a long-serving General Conference president, the professor had “some of the rarest gifts possessed by any man in our ranks,” and he was thankful for the professor’s “large executive ability.” He felt confident that “the interests of the cause” were “safe” in the professor’s hands.21

While colleagues in General Conference administration warmed to the professor, his personal style could seem irksome, even offensive to others. His preoccupation with his own
thoughts, his scholarly bent, and his consuming passion for accuracy of detail could communicate an air of cold, distant superiority. Irishman Percy Magan had at times clashed with “the big voice,” and Southern Publishing House Editor Arthur Spalding, quoting a famous line from Tennyson, found the professor’s “stony British stare” off putting. Prescott’s style was intense, and his capacity for work exacerbated this. In late 1906, following a long period of carrying multiple responsibilities during the Kellogg crisis and re-establishing the work in Washington under highly stressful circumstances, Prescott suffered something close to a nervous breakdown. The General Conference officers arranged for him to get away from the pressure at headquarters. Although he retained duties as Review editor, he spent almost eight-and-a-half months overseas in Asia and Europe fostering the work and mission of the church there (see photo on page 15).

Trouble swirled around Prescott in 1909 when vicious attacks against his writing and preaching led to his being asked to relinquish the editorship of The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald and take up city evangelism. Traditionalist Adventists such as S. N. Haskell and J. S. Washburn, who held to an inerrantist view of both Scripture and Ellen White’s writings, charged that Prescott was leading the denomination astray because he advocated a new interpretation of the expression “the daily” in Daniel 8. To Prescott’s mind, he was simply applying his 1888 Christocentric principle. Traditionalist critics also accused him of undermining the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy. But Prescott had on many occasions worked closely with Ellen White. He was familiar with the way her books had been written, and was convinced that he had an accurate and realistic view of the nature of her work. Both W. A. Spicer, the new Review editor, and Daniells also knew this. Prescott’s warnings to W. C. White about the dangers of S. N. Haskell’s unrealistic view proved to be soundly based. Prescott’s approach to interpreting Daniel 8 eventually became regarded as orthodox.

While he was being mercilessly attacked, Prescott lost his wife to cancer. It was a dark period for him, and he felt it keenly. It took an extended period of leave to enable him to recover his shattered health and bounce back, but bounce back he did. Alternative roles were found that enabled the church to continue to benefit from his skills. Such is sometimes the lot of leadership. Submission is an essential part of servant leadership. In 1916, the professor was drawn back into the leadership team at the General Conference to assist A. G. Daniells and to provide professional development for the church’s ministers.

Crisis Management Intervention

In 1921, at the age of 66, Prescott returned again to the role of educational leadership. Avondale College in Australia was in crisis and needed an experienced hand in the wheelchair. Chronic indebtedness, conflict over curriculum issues, and pressure from state authorities to improve education standards, together with a sudden increase in tuition fees, had led to a loss of confidence by the constituency and a 43 percent drop in enrollment. Henry Kirk, the incumbent president, had been pressed into duty and stayed on only because no one else could be found. Prescott had been billed by the South Pacific church’s press as one of the “foremost educational leaders in our ranks.” With radical cost-cutting adjustments and staff retrenchments, he succeeded in stabilizing affairs and realigning college programs to better meet local church and mission needs.

After a year in the role, however, Prescott located a qualified permanent replacement for himself in the person of Lynn H. Wood and moved into teaching, helping to restore staff and student morale and visiting local conferences, conducting ministerial institutes, and recruiting students. His re-imposition of educational policies and ideals from the late 1890s satisfied the governing board, but at the cost of postponing troublesome government examination and accreditation issues for another two decades. The aging Prescott was not very flexible when it came to these kinds of adjustments.

When Prescott returned from Australia in mid-1924, it was Union College’s turn to benefit from his crisis-management expertise. The school had been in trouble for several years, with declining enrollments and ballooning deficits. College trustees had actually placed the college on the market in 1923, but no one wanted to buy it—at least not for the price the board wanted. The following March, trustees considered simply closing it, but that did not seem a viable option, either. Prescott was called in to try to save the institution. It needed a strong, charismatic leader to help it through what proved to be the greatest crisis in its history. The severest of economies were the order of the day, including staff retrenchments and sale of the dairy herd, along with the securing of loans to keep the campus operating. But deficits still mounted, and before the school year was half over, the school was again placed on the market. But for Prescott, without a buyer in sight, it was simply a matter of tightening belts even further, all the while rebuilding student morale and constituency confidence. By year’s end, the college felt it had succeeded in turning the corner, and again the weary Prescott urged that a younger, more able-bodied leader be secured.

At the conclusion of his time behind the president’s desk, the professor stayed on for another two years to head up Union College’s theology department. It was important that the confidence of the constituency be retained. And as at Avondale, Prescott’s role seemed to be to re-establish older, familiar standards that provided breathing space as church constituencies regrouped to cope with further, inevitable change. The teaching and chairmanship assignment gave Prescott time to restructure the ministerial curriculum, using a new textbook, The Doctrine of Christ, which he had developed specifically for that purpose.

The Christocentric emphasis Prescott gave to his classes and his preaching, according to Leroy Edwin Froom, founding editor of Ministry magazine, was for many teachers and administrators “like a great breath of fresh air”; but other, more traditionalist thinkers derided it as “new theology.” Prescott was “ahead of his time,” according to Froom. His teaching and writing bore a rich harvest later, although the professor did not live to see it.

Prescott made his last formal contribution to Adventist higher education at Berrien Springs, where in 1933 in the midst of the severe economic depression, Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) was struggling to meet both its budgets and accred-
Prescott was both a visionary leader and a change agent. He exercised his influence in the classroom, in the pulpit, from the editor’s chair, and behind numerous executive desks.

Ministry editor Froom shared Holden’s anxiety about the atmosphere of suspicion and “reaction-ism” that had swept the church. He lamented the policy of evading “fundamental questions.” “Men who think, no matter how reverently and loyal,” were feared, he observed. Such a policy, Froom lamented, was “unworthy of this remnant movement.” Positions that had to be protected “by ecclesiastical legislation and popular sentiment . . . are weak indeed.” He was alarmed at the trend to “codify and creedalize” church teachings.

Although Prescott had not raised the matter in any of his classes at EMC, he had discussed with colleagues both at the college and at the General Conference the need for the church to develop a much more coherent understanding of the two-apartment heavenly sanctuary teaching. The conversations led to suspicions that Prescott himself held variant views on the subject. W. H. Branson, General Conference vice president, did not want Prescott teaching at Berrien Springs if he was not in “full harmony” with the church on certain “vital points.” Branson subsequently attempted to engineer Prescott’s removal from EMC, along with President Lynn H. Wood, whom he had suspected for some time.

But Prescott, an aged and battle-hardened warrior by now, fully persuaded of his moral high ground, refused to go quietly at the whim of an administrator. What had happened to the concept of due process? How could such procedures be “proper” or “fair”? He refused to move in response to the “unethical” proceedings and demanded that charges be placed in writing.

When the board of trustees heard about the maneuverings, Prescott discovered that he had the support not only of his board chairman, but also of the full board. An embarrassed long-time GC colleague who had been caught up in the engineering privately apologized for his part in the affair and sought a compromise. But Prescott stood his ground.

Nevertheless, the lack of confidence hurt Prescott badly, coming at the end of more than 50 years of committed and loyal service. He made this known to the wider General Conference leadership in his request for a full hearing. Reluctant to now proceed in granting a hearing, nine months later, General Conference officers conceded their error, apologized for the way they had proceeded, and withdrew the letter initiating the attempt to remove him.

At year’s end, back in Washington, Prescott celebrated his 80th birthday. As a sign of reconciliation, he agreed to deliver a devotional sermon at the upcoming Annual Council. Even if
1940s and 1950s, for some church leaders, the sooner the provocative Prescott was forgotten, the better. Documentary sources available in more recent decades, however, clearly reveal that for those who worked closely with him and to those who were his colleagues, the professor’s influence was profound. Educational leaders today would greatly benefit from developing an acquaintance with the life and work of this remarkable college president and first General Conference education leader. His life and leadership provide valuable insights into the challenges Adventist education continues to face in the 21st century.

More importantly, the life of W. W. Prescott is a reminder that those in leadership positions have to dedicate significant time and effort in training and mentoring the next generation of educational leaders. In today’s volatile, changing climate, they must be proactive in order to meet the economic, social, and spiritual challenges of the future.