Festschrift Presented to George Knight

Prolific Adventist author and emeritus professor of church history

Agenda | Posted on April 27, 2015

Woodrow W. Whidden, professor of religion, emeritus, Andrews University, and Gilbert Valentine, chair of the Department of Administration and Leadership, La Sierra University, edited the Festschrift, "Adventist Maverick: A Celebration of George Knight's Contribution to Adventist Thought." (Photo by Benjamin Martin, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary)

The chapel of the Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary was packed with guests, faculty, staff and students on Tuesday, April 21, for the presentation of a Festschrift to George Knight, professor of church history, emeritus. The recently released book, “Adventist Maverick: A Celebration of George Knight’s Contribution to Adventist Thought,” was given to Knight in honor of his distinguished teaching, research, editorial and publishing career. The volume, published by Pacific Press Publishing Association, is a collection of writings by 19 colleagues and students, edited by Woodrow W. Whidden and Gilbert Valentine.

Denis Fortin, professor of theology and former dean of the Seminary from 2006–2012, welcomed everyone and invited God’s presence at the joyful occasion.

Reflecting on the methodology Knight used in writing his books, President Niels-Erik Andreasen said, “He [Knight] has written a good many books about early Adventist history, and he told me once that he wrote these books the same way the pioneers wrote their books, using pen and
Festschrift tributes were given by Gilbert Valentine, chair of the Department of Administration and Leadership, La Sierra University; Jerry Moon, chair of the Department of Church History, Andrews University; and Woodrow Whidden, professor of religion, emeritus, Andrews University. Brian Strayer, professor of history, also gave a tribute to the late Gary Land, whose scholarly contributions in the area of Adventist church history are notable.

Valentine began by noting the significant impact that Knight’s scholarship has had on the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He said, “It’s not an exaggeration to say that apart from Ellen White, Professor George Knight is probably the most prolific author the Adventist church has seen. He has achieved an exceedingly wide readership, and as a result has become one of the most influential voices in the contemporary Adventist church.” The statistical evidence is astounding: 42 books (36 of which have been translated into a wide variety of foreign languages), the preface/forward or introduction to 21 more books, 43 full-length articles in other influential scholarly publications, general series editor for four large series volumes—comprising 36 other books authored by others. Add to that 150 articles he wrote for scholarly journals and 76 published book reviews and, as Valentine put it, “Dr. Knight is certainly the most prolific author that Andrews University has produced, and is its most widely read scholar.”

Knight’s ability to address theological issues in a way that engages the whole church is a particular gift. He has addressed the issues of philosophy of education, Adventist history, Adventist theology, ecclesiology and mission, and biblical exposition. Valentine went on to say that another of Knight’s distinctive contributions has been to encourage and enable other writers to find their voices and an audience. He concluded his remarks with “As a writer, as a mentor of other writers, Andrews University and the wider Adventist church have been incredibly blessed and we are deeply grateful towards you.”

Jane Thayer, associate professor of religious education, emerita, shared Jerry Moon’s tribute, which focused on Knight’s role as a teacher. Moon was unable to attend the event due to a family emergency. Moon wrote, “Forty plus years of distinguished teaching and publishing have made George Knight a magisterial figure in Seventh-day Adventist education. He has taught in Adventist colleges and seminaries all over North America and literally from Australia to Zimbabwe. For many years he spent as much as four months each year teaching in remote places where pastors did not have access to an Adventist seminary.” That means thousands of pastors and teachers took his classes, exerting an enormous influence on the thought leaders of Adventism.

Moon provided an example of what a student could expect when taking one of Knight’s classes, based on his firsthand experience, “Students of today, accustomed to lectures presented in PowerPoint and classrooms wired for the Internet, might be surprised to see Knight stride in carrying a sheath of yellow paper covered with handwritten notes.” He continued, “Knight’s persona in the classroom was confident, exuberant and unsympathetic to slackers. His keen mind, vast knowledge and perfect confidence made him a fearsome and fascinating figure.”
In 2003 Knight was the first recipient of the Daniel A. Augsburger Excellence in Teaching Award, as well as the Teacher of the Year Award. He was honored as: “A riveting lecturer; a rigorous, prepared dissertation advisor; a scholar whose publishing productivity outstripped the rest of the department combined; and whose students hold influential positions all over the world.”

Whidden spoke of Knight’s role as an editorial impresario—someone who conceives, directs and casts “operatic dramas.” In this category of literary productivity are doctoral dissertations he directed (13 listed), the Bible Amplifier Commentary Series, the Adventist Pioneer Series of biographies, and the Ellen White Encyclopedia, which he launched. Then there were also countless informal manuscript reviews. As director of doctoral dissertations, his requirements included a rigorous “first eight-page edit rule” that demanded not only “clean copy,” but, more importantly, the expression of a clear purpose for the research. That rigorous attention to detail has resulted in, as Whidden put it, “a body of literature that has made lasting, often path-breaking contributions to the fields of Adventist history (particularly in Ellen White studies), biography, biblical commentary, educational philosophy, devotional uplift and theological discourse (both historical and systematic).”

Before the formal Festschrift presentation took place, Valentine explained that the book had its origins in 2009, at a landmark conference on the study of Ellen White which was held in Portland. At that conference it was noted that quite a number of the scholars that had contributed had been students of Knight. Others there were his colleagues. Valentine continued, “This is a distinctive kind of Festschrift. One that we hope will make for a good read. Nineteen colleagues or former students of George Knight have contributed, reflecting and critiquing on the wide array of topics that Knight has written on. We then asked Knight to respond to those reflections/critiques, thus getting both sides of the conversation in this really enjoyable volume.”

Valentine then read a letter of congratulations from Dale Galusha, president of Pacific Press, while a framed copy of the book cover was unveiled. Galusha wrote, “On this occasion, Pacific Press is proud to offer its congratulations to an Adventist original, an Adventist maverick, Dr. George Knight…. May his spirit of unswerving dedication to the church he loves inspire us all to be the best Adventists and best disciples we can be.”

“It’s kind of like going to your own funeral…before you die…and I’m very appreciative of everything that’s been done,” George Knight joked as he started his short response and homily. He spoke of the need for perspective and humility after listening to what had been said. Knight particularly singled out Bonnie Beres, his former secretary, for her role in typing up his handwritten manuscripts through the years. “Without her there would be no books,” he said.

Knight quickly put the focus on Jesus Christ, stating, “That’s why we’re here today.” Speaking about his life, he said that it has been a “search for meaning.” He learned that servanthood in every area was what Jesus’ life was all about, and his death was about our salvation. During a particularly difficult time period of his life, Knight shared how “a man he never wanted to see again,” his first Bible teacher, Robert Olson, was invited to his house. Olson knew of Knight’s struggle, but he didn’t say anything about it. He spent a day “just exuding the sweet love of Jesus,” and when he left the house, Knight told his wife, “I met Jesus today, in Robert Olson.”
Knight continued by stating, “I was an Adventist for 14 years before I became a Christian. My life since that day has been dedicated to helping other people understand who Jesus is… Let’s never forget who we are in relationship to Jesus Christ and what he has done for us.”

The closing prayer was offered by John Matthews, a former student of Dr. Knight’s and current professor of educational foundations and religious education at the Andrews University School of Education, who asked God to bless Knight with “wisdom, insight and good health so that his ministry among us will continue for many years to come.”

The Berrien Springs Adventist Book Center offered a book signing following the program. If you wish to view the entire program, go to andrews.edu/go/youtube.

*By Patricia Spangler, editorial manager, Integrated Marketing & Communication*