Revolutionary Decision

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When the General Conference Autumn Council convened in October 1958, perhaps no one fully knew how the discussions that ensued and the decisions the delegates made would affect people, institutions and the Church itself. The attendees were about to witness the birth of a new comprehensive university to serve the World Church. It would be a long process culminating in the naming of Andrews University in April 1960. Three institutions in particular would never be the same again: Emmanuel Missionary College, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and Potomac University.

Emmanuel Missionary College
In 1958, Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) had been in Berrien Springs, Michigan, for 57 years. The school resided on about 400 acres, which included “rich farm land,” in what then-president Floyd O. Rittenhouse referred to as a “favored rural region.” Recent building achievements included a “modern, efficient milking parlor,” and plans were underway for a student center that would include new, updated dining services. It would be the first change in the cafeteria accommodations since the dining room was installed in the basement of the women’s dormitory in 1901. The campus was also abuzz with the near-completion of a brand-new college church, rising on the southern edge of campus. The library housed a collection of 60,000 books, but was quickly outgrowing its home in what is today known as Griggs Hall. Of the dedicated faculty, 16 had doctorate’s and 40 held master’s degrees.

In spite of its rural setting and the apparent slow pace of EMC’s campus life, Rittenhouse noted, “Our campus far more closely resembles an anthill than a calm and quiet retreat.”

In the fall of 1958, 929 students representing 23 countries were enrolled in the college. The student body reveled in the typical round of collegiate activities: the student paper, the yearbook, campus clubs, Ingathering, MV (missionary volunteer) bands, American Temperance Society orations, singing in the Collegians or playing in the EMC concert band, the SA (student association) banquet, the lyceum-concert series on Saturday nights and so on. In addition to pursuing a rich extracurricular life and their studies, the students worked all over campus—at the bindery, laundry, farm, college press and service station, to name just a few.

And the world crept into the peaceful setting, as it always had. Rittenhouse reminded the Lake Union constituency that the campus was not completely isolated: “Influences of the cold war, the struggle over integration, labor difficulties, the decline of public and private morality, the portents of radically differing patterns of society under the aegis of nuclear science and the space age, the competition for students on the part of well-financed, tax-supported colleges—all these things affect us.”

The Seminary
For the past 23 years, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary had been near the hub of the nation in Takoma Park, Maryland. A new Seminary building had been built on a lot behind the General Conference (World Church headquarters) and dedicated in January 1941, but by 1957 the building was already overflowing. Designed for a maximum enrollment of 140, it often accommodated around 200 students from 13 countries. Classes were held in the chapel and the Takoma Park Church.

In 1958 there was an influx of “fifth-year” ministerial students completing their extra year of training after college (a new churchwide requirement), but a majority of the students were mature church workers, many of them ordained, who had already served in the field and had returned for graduate training. The Seminary owned 83 apartments where the students lived, many married with families. Students often struggled to make ends...
meet, working at a wide variety of jobs throughout the urban area.

Jan Paulsen, current president of the General Conference, shared his personal experiences during an August 2009 visit to Andrews University. Paulsen holds degrees from EMC, the Theological Seminary in Takoma Park and Andrews University—uniquely positioning him to remember the times of decision and change that led to the creation and formation of Andrews University in 1959–60. Paulsen was just 22 years old when he began his education at the Seminary in Takoma Park. The actual location of the Seminary, adjacent to the General Conference, was of great importance to Paulsen’s experience: “We ate in the Review & Herald cafeteria if we wanted to. Many of the GC (General Conference) people were also there eating. We worshiped in the same churches. Some of the GC people would come and teach the classes. The aura of being close to the GC was impactful on me.”

**Potomac University**

In 1955, the General Conference had undertaken the issue of expanding advanced study in the denomination by forming the Committee on Graduate Work. The Church—both in North America and worldwide—desperately needed educators with advanced degrees in its secondary schools and colleges. The result of the Committee’s research and deliberations was a decision made at the 1956 Annual Council to establish a university that would consist of “an organic union of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and a new graduate school,” as well as an “affiliation with Washington Missionary College as the undergraduate institution.” E.D. Dick, then-president of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, was asked to serve as acting president of the new entity, which would be called Potomac University. W.H. Beaven, the dean, began to develop graduate programs in religion, history and education, and made plans for degrees in English, music and biology as soon as finances permitted.

Then the wrangling over the location of the new university began. There was no extra room on the cramped campus of Washington Missionary College or at the Seminary. Would the University stay in Takoma Park with new facilities to be built on 18 acres next to Takoma Academy? Would the whole school move out of the city? There were disagreements among church leadership as to the next step.

In June 1958, the trustees decided to call a new president to Potomac University—Rittenhouse, president of EMC in Berrien Springs. Rittenhouse accepted and began a double life of serving as president to both EMC and Potomac University until a replacement could be found for his duties in Berrien Springs.

Rittenhouse liked to say that during that stressful period he commuted by night and worked by day. Known for having a frank sense of humor combined with a quick wit, Rittenhouse was well-known for his quips. Greg Constantine, research professor of art and artist-in-residence emeritus (and a student at EMC/Andrews University from 1955 to 1960), recalls one of the president’s memorable pieces of advice to the students: “One of the things he liked to say was, ‘The door that let you in will also let you out.’”

Rittenhouse agreed to be president of Potomac University contingent upon the understanding that all three institutions—Washington Missionary College, the Seminary and the graduate school—would be integrated. R.R. Figuhr, General Conference president at that time, assured him that that would be the case. At that time, Rittenhouse had no other thought than that the new combined university would be located in the Washington, D.C., area.

Rittenhouse, along with the rest of the search committee, set his attention on finding a location to build this new university in the greater D.C. area. They found a parcel of property—not far from what is today the location of the General Conference headquarters—and paid down an option with intentions to build the new integrated school there.

“I worked night and day, early and late, trying to get a decision to build the new institution there,” said Rittenhouse. “But I soon discovered Columbia Union Conference was very hesitant to move Washington Missionary College.” Money was the culprit. Church leadership felt they did not have sufficient funds to build the new institution and soon politics set in. Eventually, according to Rittenhouse, the entire proposal—the bringing together of the graduate school, the Seminary and Washington Missionary College—fell apart over the issue of .25 percent interest on a loan.

**Autumn Council 1958**

Things came to a head in October 1958. Rittenhouse wrote to Figuhr just days before Autumn Council began. In that letter he wrote, “Now these developments clearly indicate that the university as outlined to me does not now seem to be either in the immediate or remote prospect. Thus, the post which I thought I was to have does not now exist nor does it appear likely to exist anytime in the near future. I do not feel that I would fit very well in the Seminary as such by itself.

... Under these circumstances I feel that I am left no choice but to bow out of the picture. ... I plan to be in Washington next week for a few days of the Autumn Council, but I cannot stay long.”

Back in Berrien Springs, most at the EMC campus were very unhappy Rittenhouse was leaving. There was apparently a movement...
afoot, starting almost immediately after he accepted the Potomac University position, to argue for the newly-combined university to be located in Berrien Springs.

Discussion about the university began on Thursday morning, October 23, 1958. Only about 200 in the Council had voting privileges, but the Takoma Park Church was packed with around 500 people. Figuhr made the first public announcement to the assembly that there was a proposal to move the university to Berrien Springs. So many people wanted to speak to the issue that the discussion continued all afternoon and resumed again on Friday morning.

Rittenhouse later recalled of the Autumn Council, “By that time, the Lake Union had decided maybe they should make a plea to have the graduate program moved to EMC. Not having really thought it through thoroughly, but with a hasty decision, Elder J.D. Smith, president of the Lake Union Conference, stood up and said, ‘We’d like to offer the graduate program 40 acres of free land if you’ll come to join [us with] EMC as the undergraduate part of the institution. You can bring the seminary and the graduate school here to Berrien Springs.’”

Over the course of Autumn Council, Rittenhouse made a number of speeches. At this point, he was clearly advocating for a move to Berrien Springs. Charles Weniger was emphatic about the advantages of being in a cultural center like D.C., with access to the Library of Congress, and at the center of the Seventh-day Adventist power structure.

Leona Running was then a faculty member at the Seminary in Takoma Park but also a Michigan native and alumna of EMC. She said, “Several of the people that made speeches in the debate ... talked about the need for a rural location and following Mrs. White’s advice. They were very much astonished afterward to find out they had been understood as supporting the move to Berrien Springs.’”

Some of the misunderstanding that day may have been caused by events that took place before the meetings in Takoma Park. A campaign had been mounted during the summer to bring the university to Michigan. An unsigned, anonymous memorandum circulated through the summer months arguing for the university to be moved out of the D.C. area. It didn’t name Berrien Springs specifically, but it collected a number of quotations from Ellen White about how denominational schools should be established in rural areas.

It also argued, with the late 1950s consciousness of the Cold War, that if there were to be atomic warfare, D.C. would be one of the first targets in the United States. It implied that a university located even within 25 to 30 miles of the capital city would not be safe enough.

It began to be clear that the idea of relocating to Berrien Springs was gaining ground.

Once the Columbia Union realized a move to Berrien Springs was quite possible, they also realized the impact that losing the tithe of seminary students, faculty and staff would have on their budget, according to Rittenhouse’s account. They went to Figuhr and asked for a decision to be postponed to give them time to reconsider. Rittenhouse remembered that Figuhr’s “dander was up,” and he said, “Absolutely not. You had your chance. Before we adjourn tonight, the decision is going to be made.”

Rittenhouse had a speaking appointment at EMC back in Berrien Springs, so he had to leave Takoma Park early, before a final decision was made.

“I didn’t know what the decision would be,” said Rittenhouse. “I only knew I was in terrible mental turmoil and perplexity because I was so disappointed that we couldn’t have gone out towards Columbia on that spot. That would have answered a lot of the objections and [it] would have been a new place to begin all over again, but [that didn’t happen] because of the lack of vision on behalf of the people in the Columbia Union and because the General Conference was not willing to give more time to consider it. I came home that night by plane, and when I reached home the telephone rang. It was a message that they had voted 3-1 to come to Berrien Springs. That was the beginning of tribulation as far as I was concerned.”

Running, professor emerita of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, was in the balcony of the Takoma Park Church during the Autumn Council. When
the decision was finally made, she was dumbstruck: “We were just numb. What about access to the Library of Congress and the other libraries in the area? What about all the jobs our students and their families had access to in that area?” says Running. “There were just all kinds of problems that we saw, not the least of which was three or four faculty members had just built lovely new homes out in the countryside in the area where they thought the school might move to.”

“The sentiments Dr. Running expressed were what the teachers felt, and filtered through into statements they made to the class,” says Paulsen. “There was a general sense of dismay and anger. They felt a coup had been made. They felt this was a day of real gloom that the church had made this decision.”

**Andrews University**

Nonetheless, the decision had been made. And now that this newly-combined institution was underway, a new name was needed. A Potomac University in Berrien Springs did not seem to make much sense. In April 1959, the Board voted the name Lake Michigan University, but the EMC campus rose up in protest. The name was all about location, they said, and told nothing about the nature of the school or its mission. They argued that the alumni and the constituency would not be happy.

A number of possible names were suggested and discussed: Lake Central University, Lake Arbor University, Pioneer Memorial University, Griggs University, Farnsworth University and Emmanuel University. Two strong possibilities were Maranatha University and J.N. Andrews University.

Rittenhouse preferred Maranatha University but when it came to the board, some thought it sounded too “highfalutin.” The name lost by three votes. And that is how Andrews University got its name, a tribute to a dedicated scholar and the first official missionary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to serve outside North America.

Choosing a name didn’t solve the angst felt in the community. Rittenhouse later reported that some of the faculty members [at EMC] said we don’t know what we’re up against. And Rittenhouse told them, “I can tell you: we’re up against a revolution. That’s what’s going to happen. This institution will never be the same again. And it will be a fine opportunity to serve. The objectives are the same and I believe it’s under God’s providence that we came here.”

Niels-Erik Andreasen, president of Andrews University, remembers the old-timers at EMC were not so happy about the newcomers living in fine brick houses on University Boulevard or that faculty in the Seminary had one full-time secretary for every two teachers. “I remember thinking, Is this ever going to be one university?”

**Education as a Defining Factor**

Two years before Andrews University was born, the book, Questions on Doctrine, was published. It was a response to the question asked of the Seventh-day Adventist church: Is it a Christian church or a religious sect? “That had been asked in the 1950s, I believe, and the book was written to answer those questions. The answer was: We are a church,” says Andreasen.

“One of the things that distinguishes a church from a religious sect is education. I’ve often wondered if a historian could figure out if there is a relationship between making that decision about our church by the administration of R.R. Figuhr and then by the same administration making a decision that the university should be built with an undergraduate, a graduate and a seminary faculty. So the intriguing question is: Does a Christian church that has defined itself that way also feel compelled to start a university, a real university? Which is what Andrews was intended to be. The more I hear the dialogue, the more I think the answer is ‘Yes,’” says Andreasen.

“These people thought a real Christian church that wants to get rid of the sectarian connotations wants to embrace a university where Christian faith and Christian thinking and theology are informed by theologians, seminary teachers and missionaries returning from the field,” says Andreasen. “Our mission is to see to it that our church is a strong Christian church in the world, something we know cannot happen without a commitment to Seventh-day Adventist Christian education.”

Rittenhouse’s vision at the dawn of Andrews University placed the institution at the helm of Seventh-day Adventist education. “We have the benefit now of being able to look back on the period of several decades. We can clearly see the experience we’ve gained and look at the service that has been provided by the institution, how it has responded to the needs of the church and done so in a wonderful manner,” says Paulsen. “We have been blessed.”

The background information for this article was taken from primary documents—minutes, letters and transcripts of reports—in the General Conference Archives and the Center for Adventist Research.

Comments by Drs. Rittenhouse, Running and Giddings were made in a panel discussion entitled “The Birth of Andrews University,” held on May 14, 1988. It was recorded on videotape.

Remarks by Greg Constantine, Jan Paulsen and Niels-Erik Andreasen are taken from an interview conducted by Brent Geraty on August 14, 2009, for the vespers program of Fall Fellowship at Andrews University in celebration of 50 Years as Andrews University.

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