

Centennial Moments

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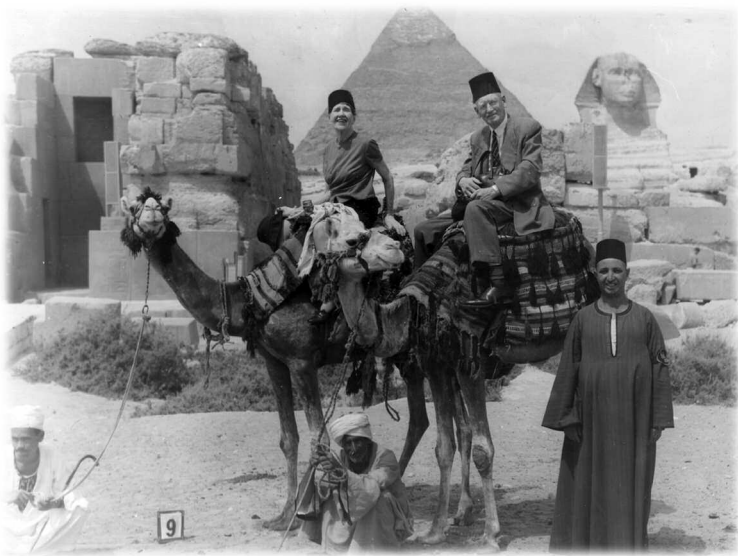
William Wirth

From Loma Linda University and Medical Center's earliest beginnings, spirituality and teaching religion have played an important role in our institutional philosophy of healing and wholeness. This article is the first of a three-part series highlighting our religion faculty. This first article highlights the career of William George Wirth, who was our first religion faculty member to hold a PhD.

"Bill" Wirth (as he was called) was born in New York City to immigrant parents in 1884. Both he and his mother attended evangelistic meetings by E.E. Franke. He experienced a deep spiritual awakening and chose to be baptized. Bill found employment with the construction crews at Washington Missionary College (now Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland), where he worked his way through school.

Partway through his college program he transferred to Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska (accredited through the University of Nebraska), so that he could graduate from an accredited program. After graduation he taught briefly at Champion Academy in Loveland, Colorado. It was here that he met H.M.S. Richards, one of his students, and the two became lifelong friends—Dr. Wirth became a lifelong mentor to Dr. Richards. Dr. Wirth also met and married Lillie Wolfram in 1911.

The two went together to work at South Lancaster Academy in New England, and in 1918 taught briefly at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. It was while he was there that W.C. White (who lived nearby) encouraged him to obtain further education. His decision to attend graduate school was extremely controversial and other Church leaders tried to dissuade Dr. Wirth from attending a "worldly" graduate school (at a time when many conservative Christian groups frowned



upon modernist, liberal graduate programs). Despite these cautions he enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. He obtained an MA and a PhD, completing the latter in 1923.

As he was nearing the end of his graduate program, Drs. Percy T. Magan and Newton Evans traveled to Berkeley to recruit Dr. Wirth to teach at the Los Angeles Division of the College of Medical Evangelists. Both administrators felt that it was important to have a religion teacher who had academic qualifications that matched those of the doctors they were trying to train.

Dr. Wirth taught a diverse range of classes with class topics that included "advanced doctrines," "New Testament epistles," "Old Testament," and a course titled "topical review and evangelistic training." He also held a weekly chapel service that all the students were

required to attend. Dr. Wirth cared deeply for his students—a fact reflected in the many recollections from students who expressed their affection for their Bible teacher. He was also known as a fast driver, as he sometimes squealed his tires across campus.

As one of the few religion teachers within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination with an advanced degree, Dr. Wirth was able to speak out about issues within the Church. As a teacher at Pacific Union College he had attended the 1919 Bible Conference, and during the 1920s he wrote several books on current issues (the fundamentalist/modernist controversy) and even wrote his dissertation on the eschatological role of Turkey in end-time events. Throughout the years, he gained wide respect as a scholar. Later on in his career, during the 1950s, he made a significant contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary.

In his later years, Dr. Wirth pastored several churches during his retirement. He kept in contact with his many students (many of whom were practicing physicians). Dr. Wirth had changed the approach of the previous Bible teachers from one that had emphasized "defending the faith," to instead an approach that stressed the importance of living the faith within the context of practicing medicine.

