

Scragg, Walter Robert Lambert (1925–2010)

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Walter Scragg, born in New Zealand, served the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church as an evangelist, broadcaster, college principal, departmental director, and administrator. He spent 13 years at the General Conference headquarters in Washington, D.C., and was president of both the Northern European/West Africa Division and the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

Early Years

Walter Robert Lambert Scragg was born in Auckland, New Zealand, on November 17, 1925.¹ His parents were Walter Matthew Rhodes Scragg and Daisy Irene (Quodrill).² He had two older siblings: Ruhamah Iris Grace, born on January 31, 1922, at Christchurch, New Zealand; and Roy Frederick Rhodes, born on February 19, 1924, at Fielding, New Zealand.³

At the time of his birth his father, W.M.R. Scragg, had recently been appointed as the president of the North New Zealand Conference of the SDA Church.⁴ W.M.R. Scragg had become a Seventh-day Adventist in 1914 in South Australia after he had “studied [for baptism] under Bro. Alfred Spearing at Scott’s Creek, S. A.”⁵ After studying at



W.R.L. Scragg.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

the Australasian Missionary College between 1915 and 1918, he had commenced his denominational employment in October 1918.⁶ Thus Walter grew up in the home of an SDA minister. He had lived in New Zealand, South Australia, New South Wales, Western Australia, and Tasmania by the time he was 16, at which time the family were again in South Australia, where W.M.R. Scragg had been appointed as president.

Denominational Service

While in Adelaide, South Australia, the younger Walter Scragg completed his schooling and commenced his denominational service as a “van assistant and oven boy” at the Sanitarium Health Food Company factory. It was January 1942. He remained in that position until the beginning of 1943 when he was elevated the position of “maker” on the Weet Bix line at the factory.⁷

At the end of 1943, having gathered some means to pay for his ongoing education, Scragg left home to attend the Australasian Missionary College (now Avondale College of Higher Education) in Cooranbong, NSW. He graduated from the ministerial training course at the end of 1945. He then spent a year in nursing training at the Sydney Sanitarium during 1946.⁸ During 1947 and 1948 he returned to Adelaide, where he studied at the University of Adelaide and became, if not the first, certainly one of very few SDA ministers in Australia at the time to hold a bachelor’s degree from a secular institution.⁹

Scragg entered ministry in the Victorian Conference in December 1948 and worked there as an evangelist until the end of January 1956. In April 24, 1951, he married Elizabeth Esther Onion in the Preston, Victoria, SDA Church.¹⁰ Three children were to be born into the Scragg home: Gregory John, Bronwyn Jane (Koolik), and Walter Mark Lambert.¹¹

On January 17, 1956, at the Victorian camp meeting, Scragg was ordained to the gospel ministry.¹² Shortly thereafter the family left Victoria for Scragg to take up an appointment as the associate speaker for the Voice of Prophecy radio broadcast, based in Wahroonga, a media ministry with which he was to become long associated.¹³ Between 1957 and the middle of 1965 Scragg filled a number of portfolios for the Australasian Division. In 1957 and 1958 he was the director for the Voice of Prophecy radio broadcast for the division. For the years 1959 to August 1962 he was the assistant Radio and TV secretary. From 1961 until July 1962 he held the additional portfolio of Sabbath School secretary for the division. In August 1962 he was appointed as the radio and TV secretary, as well as the Sabbath School secretary, for the division. He held this position until June 30, 1965.¹⁴

As of July 1, 1965, Scragg was appointed principal of Longburn College in New Zealand. This was a major change of direction for him. However, he served only briefly in the role until November 30, 1966, when he took up an invitation given at the General Conference session that year to the position of associate secretary for the Radio and Television Department at the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In 1972 he was elected to leadership in that department as the secretary for Radio and TV. -In 1973 the name of his portfolio was changed to Communications director, a position he held until the General Conference session in mid-1975,

when he was elected president of the Northern European/ West Africa Division, based in St. Albans, England!¹⁵ Eight years later he was invited to be the president of the Australasian Division, based in Sydney, Australia!¹⁶ He was succeeded in the Northern European/West Africa Division by Jan Paulsen, who was later to become the General Conference president.¹⁷ Scragg took up his duties in the Australasian Division on January 9, 1984.¹⁸ Just six days later he presided at his first official function as president when he took the dedicatory address at the opening of the new North New Zealand administrative headquarters and the Adventist Retirement Village.¹⁹ During his tenure the name of the division was changed from the Australasian Division to the South Pacific division.²⁰ This change was effected in recognition of the fact that all of the countries in the division were located within the South Pacific Ocean. It also was an acknowledgment of the increasing percentage of the division membership that called countries other than Australia home. It was a popular decision.

Soon after becoming president of the South Pacific Division, Pacific Adventist College was opened just outside Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. The college was officially opened by Sir Michael Somare, prime minister of PNG, on Monday, February 13, 1984, with representatives from several Island governments, and all levels of the Adventist Church from General Conference to local missions being present.²¹ Scragg was present as a strong advocate of education in general, and specifically as one interested in the training of indigenous SDA young people from the Pacific to take over from expatriates the operation of the church and its institutions in the island nations of the Pacific. Pacific Adventist College became Pacific Adventist University in November 1996, and continues to fulfill the vision that Scragg and his predecessors saw.²²

On March 8, 1986, Scragg unveiled the dedication plaque at the opening of a new church building at Avondale College.²³ This was the first time in its 90-year history that the college had a church, exclusively dedicated for worship, in the center of the campus. Throughout his tenure of leadership Scragg demonstrated his commitment to SDA Christian education and the spiritual focus of each campus. He ensured that individuals who could pursue higher education degrees (which could be deployed in the senior institutions) were selected.²⁴

Scragg served as president of the South Pacific Division until the General Conference session in mid-1990.²⁵ A fitting tribute to his years of leadership in the South Pacific was written in the *Record* by Gary Krause at the finish of his term of service.²⁶ He then spent a term of five years at the General Conference headquarters once again, this time as the director of Adventist World Radio for the international Church. While working with Adventist World Radio and shortly before his retirement, Scragg made some telling comments on his years of service, as recorded by the editor of the *Review and Herald*, William Johnsson. He said:

"The past five years have been the most rewarding of my entire ministry. My work has been entirely involved in the mission of the church. Previously I served for 15 years as a division president, but those years were as nothing compared with these past five. I felt as though I had gone back to the beginning of my ministerial career, when I graduated from college without theological questions and intent only on the mission of the church."²⁷

Adventist World Radio experienced considerable growth during Scragg's tenure. A notable example of that growth was the establishment of a shortwave radio station on Guam that had the capacity to reach much of eastern Asia.²⁸ He presented, to the 1995 General Conference session, a report that gave an overview of the progress that had been made.²⁹

Contribution

Scragg retired in 1996 after 48 years of service for the Church.³⁰ However, it was not long before he and Betty were asked to pastor the newly formed Fox Valley church in Wahroonga, NSW.³¹ Subsequently they also pastored the Sligo church in Washington, D.C., until they returned home in 2000.³² During this time the General Conference formally recognized Scragg's contribution to the development of communication strategies in the Church. At the final meeting of the General Conference Communication Strategic Planning Committee, held in Toronto, Canada, on June 1, 1999, Pastor Scragg received an award "in appreciation of his visionary contribution to the development and promotion of the communication strategy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."³³

Walter Scragg was a consistent contributor to SDA journals and magazines and was the author of two devotional books, *Run This Race* (for juniors) and *Such Bright Hopes* (for seniors).³⁴ Other books that he authored included: *Kukukuku Walkabout and Other Stories; The Media, the Message, and the Man; Reef Riders of Rarotonga and Other Stories; Directions: A Look at the Paths of Life; The In-between God; The God Who Says Yes; God's Warrior of Vanuatu; The AWR Story Book: Making the Impossible Possible*.³⁵ He was also the author of a number of Sabbath School quarterlies and the associated helps. In November 1985 it was reported:

"He has prepared five sets of Adult Sabbath school lessons, two sets of teachers' helps for the adult lessons, three Bible correspondence courses, and Pastor's Bible Class material for the Sabbath School Department. . . . At present he is preparing the Sabbath school lessons for the second and third quarters of 1987, on the books of Luke and Acts, and is also writing the support books to accompany these lessons."³⁶

In 1982 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Andrews University.³⁷ As of 2018 he is one of only four individuals from the South Pacific region to be granted such an honor by the university.³⁸

Walter Scragg died on Monday, September 20, 2010, at the age of 84.³⁹ By June 2011 Betty had moved into a nursing home in Ashbury, Sydney, NSW, close to the home of her younger son, Mark.⁴⁰ She died on March 5, 2012, at the age of 81.⁴¹

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