

# Wittschiebe, Charles Edward (1908–1991) and Violet Maud (Scriven) (1909–1998)

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## PAMELA CONSUEGRA, AND CLAUDIO CONSUEGRA

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Charles and Violet Wittschiebe were educators, missionaries to China, and World War II Japanese internment camp survivors. Charles served as a religion professor at Southern Missionary College



Charles Wittschiebe, 1957.

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

and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, first in Washington D.C. and later Berrien Springs, MI. Charles authored three books, his best-known of which is *God Invented Sex*.

## Background

Charles Edward Wittschiebe was born on May 2, 1908, in Bronx, New York. He was born to Charles John Wittschiebe (1881-1952) and Elizabeth Frey (1888-1967). Both of his parents had immigrated to the United States from Germany.<sup>1</sup> At only sixteen, Charles found employment at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists as a bookkeeper and held a special customs' pass to meet Adventist missionaries returning from their assignments outside the United States.<sup>2</sup> Likely, this introduction to missionaries at an early age instilled in him a love for mission work and helped shape his future.

Charles married Violet Maud Scriven. Violet was born on September 1, 1909, to Charles Matthais Scriven (1871-1943) and Helen McNees Winey (1871-1926).<sup>3</sup> Violet grew up in rural South Dakota but traveled east to live with an older brother and attend college in Massachusetts. While there, she met and fell in love with Charles Wittschiebe. They were married on August 18, 1931, on the campus of Union Springs Academy, at Union Springs, New York.<sup>4</sup> Charles lovingly referred to her as "Doll," and they were married for almost sixty years.

Charles served for five years as dean of men at Union Springs Academy. Both Violet and Charles taught at the academy. While there, the couple welcomed their first child, Helen Joanne, in 1933. From Union Springs Academy, Charles went on to serve one year as principal of Greater New York Academy, and then he and his wife Violet were asked to go to China to serve as missionaries.<sup>5</sup>

## Missionary Service

In 1937, Charles and his family made the journey to China, arriving in the midst of the Second Sino-Japanese War. As the United States was not at war with Japan at the time, Charles worked for the next few years as a teacher and boys' dean, then called a preceptor, at Far Eastern Academy in Shanghai. Violet worked as an English teacher.<sup>6</sup>

In 1940, as threat of world war increased, the couple were transferred to the South China Union.<sup>7</sup> On September 17, 1940, the couple's second daughter, Jeannine Elizabeth was born in Shanghai Sanitarium.<sup>8</sup> The family relocated to Burma for intensive Chinese language study at the end of 1940. In 1941, the family were supposed to return to Hong Kong, where Charles was to serve as educational and Missionary Volunteer secretary of the South China Union and teach classes at the China Training Institute.<sup>9</sup> The anticipated departure for Hong Kong was delayed due to impending war. Believing that the presence of American troops in the Philippines would protect foreigners, the division relocated as many missionaries in China from Allied countries to the Philippines as possible. Charles was to settle Violet and their daughters in Baguio and then proceed to Hong Kong. That plan

was thwarted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the invasion of the Philippines ten hours later.<sup>10</sup>

Charles, Violet, and their young daughters were interned by the Japanese army on December 28, 1941. The internment lasted until February 3, 1945. They were interned in Camp John Hay and Camp Holmes in Baguio, and lastly at Bilibid prison in Manila. Charles was nicknamed “goat herder” in Camp Holmes. In order to prevent malnutrition and dysentery, Charles obtained several goats to provide supplemental milk for their children.<sup>11</sup>

On February 4, 1945, the Wittschiebes along with most of the Chinese division personnel were liberated by American soldiers. V. T. Armstrong, then president of the Far Eastern Division, described the event: “after three years of imprisonment, slow starvation, isolation, and the hardship of internment-camp life, God has miraculously delivered our fellow missionaries in the Philippine Islands.”<sup>12</sup> W. P. Bradley reported the experience of the missionaries’ rescue in fuller detail. The missionaries were moved to Bilibid Prison in Manila on December 28 after three years internment in Baguio.<sup>13</sup> Letters from the liberated group and reports on them by physicians revealed how ill and malnourished many of the internees were. Some were seriously ill with dysentery and beriberi—a disease caused by lack of adequate nutrients which can result in permanent physical damage. Many prisoners of war died of beriberi during World War II.<sup>14</sup>

## Teaching in the United States

The Wittschiebes were first-hand observers of the battle of Manila and rejoiced at the liberation of the Philippines. They returned by ship to San Francisco on May 1945. Upon his return, Charles delivered personal greetings to the over 200 families of American servicemen he had met while in the Philippines. During their furlough and recovery from their wartime experience, Charles completed an M.A. in Church History, graduating in June 1946.<sup>15</sup>

After the war, the General Conference at first urged the Wittschiebes to return to Far Eastern Academy, but the family’s health made it unadvisable.<sup>16</sup> The General Conference Committee subsequently “VOTED, That for health reasons Charles Wittschiebe be released from the call to return to China” and shifted the call instead to Southern Missionary College—a call the family accepted.<sup>17</sup> Charles was a professor and eventually the chair of the religion department at Southern Missionary College.<sup>18</sup> While teaching, Charles was added to the Sabbath School Lesson Committee.<sup>19</sup> In 1951, the Wittschiebes had a third child, Charles David. Two years later, in 1953, Charles graduated with a B.D.<sup>20</sup>

Charles was one of the founders of the Institute on Mental Health at Harding Hospital in Worthington, Ohio. The Institute fostered communication between clergy and mental health professionals. Charles along with his friend, Charles Landis Anderson, saw an urgent need to better inform pastors of mental health issues. Sponsored by Harding Hospital, they led an annual meeting of ministers and physicians that lasted for more than three decades. The purpose of the meeting was to provide ministers with practical tools, information, and experience

to aid them in handling the emotional problems that they encountered regularly in their ministry. This collaborative endeavor aided in enhancing the ministry of the local church pastor. Together, Charles Wittschiebe and Anderson played a significant role in promoting psychiatry in the Adventist medical system and in creating dialogue between physicians and clergy.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, in the 1950s, Charles traveled to conferences to hold regional 10-week training courses for pastors and bible instructors on pastoral counseling. members of the counseling class expressed “enthusiasm for the invaluable help this course afforded them in handling pastoral problems and in counseling members in their districts.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1954, the General Conference Committee requested that Charles transfer to the faculty of the Theological Seminary, then in Takoma Park, the Seminary shortly thereafter moved to Berrien Springs, Michigan.<sup>23</sup> On May 31, 1964, Charles was recognized for his dedication as a professor of pastoral care at the Seminary and was given an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. By this time, Charles had taught on the secondary and collegiate levels for twenty-nine years and had been on the Seminary staff for ten years.<sup>24</sup> His persuasive teaching and dedication to pastoral care and counseling influenced a whole generation of clergy. During 1960s, Charles also presented Family Life Series lectures throughout the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Charles never lost the passion for mission service and in 1969 became one of the teaching faculty of the World Mission Institute, on the campus of Andrews University. The purpose of this institute was to provide six weeks of training for new missionaries, in order to increase their effectiveness.<sup>26</sup>

## Retirement and Legacy

In 1974, Charles and Violet retired to Columbus, North Carolina, where he continued to write, lecture, and do personal counseling with patients in his son-in-law's medical practice. During retirement, Charles authored three books on sexuality. His most well-known work is *God Invented Sex*, published in 1974. He used a question-and-answer format in his book. He answered the questions that most people were too embarrassed to ask in person. Charles' answers to these posed questions are unblushing and direct. *God Invented Sex* was a pioneering work. It was the first book published by an Adventist publishing house that dealt directly with questions about abortion, adultery, masturbation, homosexuality, contraceptives, and intimate sex. Charles also wrote two more works on a Christian perspective on sex to different audiences: *Teens and Love and Sex*, published in 1982, and *Your Teens and Sex*, published in 1983.

Charles died on April 11, 1991. He left behind Violet, three children, and three grandchildren. Violet died seven years later, on November 13, 1998.<sup>27</sup>

The legacy of Charles Wittschiebe is best summed up in the title of an article he penned for *Ministry* in 1958: “True Religion is a Personal Relationship.” His ministry centered on improving human relationships within the biblical context.<sup>28</sup> He dedicated his life to helping others experience fulfilled interpersonal relationships in the home and equipping ministers to aid their parishioners develop better relationships. For him, meaningful

human relationships were a glimpse of heaven. He wrote, "Religion, then, is a personal relationship whose best symbols, even in a sinful world, are those of father-and-son, and husband and-wife. In this setting concepts such as justification, sanctification, repentance, conversion, forgiveness, sin, and many others reveal their true meaning."<sup>29</sup>

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## NOTES

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