

Akers, George H.

(1926–2017)

RON DU PREEZ

Raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home in South Africa, Ron du Preez has served in several countries, as pastor, professor, college president, etc. His love of research, especially Scripture, led him to earn three Masters' degrees, a Ph.D., a Th.D., and a D.Min. Author and main editor of several books, Professor du Preez actively promotes healthy living, motivates many to participate in abundant life in Jesus Christ, and enjoys time with his wife, Lynda.

George Hillry Akers was a lifelong educator and administrator for the Seventh-day Adventist educational system.

Early Life

George Hillry Akers¹ was born June 18, 1926, to Hillry Bogle Akers and Kitty H. (Smith) Akers. He was born in the same simple clapboard house on the main street of Rock Hall on Maryland's Eastern Shore in the United States as were his father and grandfather before him. Akers was the second child, and only son of Hillry and Kitty Akers. His older sister, Miriam, was born in 1925, and his younger sister, Eolin, twelve years later in 1938.

Aker's father was a captain and a master mariner in the Merchant Marine, licensed to captain any size ship on any navigable waters. Thus, it happened that Captain Akers met Kitty Smith in London and brought her back to the United States to start a new life and family in Rock Hall. Because his seafaring father was often absent for months at a time, George Akers grew up with regular duties and responsibilities and the expectation that he be the "man of the family." However, Akers always had lots of fun and learned to love the Chesapeake Bay where he swam and sailed—retaining his love of sailing and of the sea all his life.

When Akers entered the seventh grade, his family, having attended a series of religious meetings, joined the Rock Hall Seventh-day Adventist church. Providentially, that church also opened a small elementary grade



George Akers

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

school about the same time. Akers became a charter member and completed elementary grades seven and eight there. Thus, in a simple one-room schoolhouse in the small fishing village of Rock Hall, George Akers began a lifelong experience with Christian education.

To suggest that Akers was a model student would be stretching the truth. Though always a bright and capable student, he was also a rather indifferent one—expending more time on games and goofing around. After one particular incident, his teacher at the Rock Hall school had Akers remain after class. Instead of the expected discipline, the diligent Miss Sarita Lochstamphor spoke words from her heart that made an indelible impression on young Akers: “Do you want to have fun for a moment? Or do you want to make a difference for eternity? You’re made for better things than fun and games and getting laughs.” Then she prayed with Akers, asking the Lord to guide his future. That simple incident with his first Christian teacher planted a seed in Akers’ mind, and he began to think that he might have some part to play in shaping people’s lives for the better.

Following eighth grade graduation, Akers wanted to attend Shenandoah Valley Academy. However, finances were rather tight in the Akers household in 1939, so he finished his first two years of high school at Rock Hall High School. In the interim his mother tried to cut costs and collected savings in an old oatmeal tin. Thus, in 1941 Akers was able to go to Shenandoah Valley Academy with the money his mother had saved as an entrance fee. The remaining funds were earned by Akers working at various on-campus jobs. Two years later he graduated from Shenandoah Valley Academy.

Still just sixteen years old, Akers headed straight to Washington Missionary College (WMC) in Takoma Park, Maryland, to begin studying as well as working as many as three jobs to pay his tuition. Despite his many jobs, George Akers was a highly involved student, majoring in religion with history and English minors. In addition, he sang bass in the school quartet and was elected president of his senior class.

Service at the Academy Level (1947-1959)

When Akers graduated from WMC in 1947, he had several calls to the gospel ministry, to which he was later ordained though he never served in a fulltime role as a church pastor. It was the invitation to be dean of boys at Ozark Academy near Gentry, Arkansas, that captured his attention since the idea of working directly with youth had been on his mind. So, at twenty-one years of age Akers moved to Ozark Academy where he served for two years, from 1947 through 1949, with his customary enthusiasm and vigor. During this time, Akers proposed to Imogene Allen, a fellow student at WMC. They were married on August 31, 1948.

In 1949, Akers was called to Sheyenne River Academy in Harvey, North Dakota, where he served once again as a boys’ dean, a position he held until 1952. In addition to being fully employed as boys’ dean and teacher, and surviving several major blizzards, the birth of their first child, Douglas (Doug) Allen Akers, on November 25, 1949, was a high point for the young couple. In 1952, while still in his mid-twenties, Akers accepted a call to become principal of Philadelphia Academy, which included grades one through twelve. His talent for

recruitment and his ability to articulate a shared message of purpose for the entire school family, dramatically increased the school's enrollment. Under Akers' direction, the students memorized more than one hundred sacred hymns. Every Sabbath the lively teenagers bussed to one of the area churches where they would sing the old gospel hymns.

Another auspicious moment around this time was the birth of a second son, Daniel (Danny) Wayne Akers, on August 13, 1953. Following the 1954 school year, Akers was able to fulfill his promise to his wife that she could complete her college degree, as he had accepted a call to teach English at Takoma Academy for the 1954-1955 school year. With two young sons, it was not possible for Imogene to attend college full-time. However, with the help of her parents who lived nearby, she was able to finish her last year of coursework within two years, and thus complete her B.A. degree in music.

In 1955, George Akers accepted the invitation to be principal at his *alma mater*, Shenandoah Valley Academy, a position he held through 1959. During his service there, the school's enrollment more than doubled to over 300 students, and a major building campaign expanded and renovated the campus. Students and faculty alike learned that service was a crucial Christian value, and that Christian education could be both academically rigorous and spiritually sound.

It was also during this time, in 1956, that Akers completed his Master's degree in education from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Akers' successful experience at Temple University brought him to the conclusion that the education he had received from Seventh-day Adventist schools had fully prepared him for the world of ideas in higher education. One did not have to choose between a secular higher education and Christian education. A balanced curriculum that integrated essential principles of faith together with rigorous academic discipline was clearly possible. Also, a completely Christian education did not have to deprecate either Christianity or academics. This conviction became a major cornerstone of Akers' strong emphasis on the balanced integration of faith and learning throughout his career.

Leadership at the Tertiary Level (1959-1985)

In 1959, Akers accepted a call to La Sierra College in California, to be dean of students—a position he held for three years. Beginning in 1962, he was granted a two-year leave of absence to pursue his doctorate in education at the University of Southern California. Akers' strong convictions on Christian education and character development might have been at odds with the secular institution priding itself on rigorous academics. However, his unique ability to grasp a philosophical concept and relate it within the context of a fully grounded Christian faith impressed Akers' academic advisors, who greatly encouraged his progress. He also considered it providential that he was able to develop a close professional and personal relationship with Dr. Earl V. Pullias, a well-respected educator and man of faith, who served as Akers' major advisor for his doctoral study. Akers had ample opportunity to further refine his vision for Christian education as a vital force to equip young people to

engage the secular world without being overwhelmed by it. Never an isolationist, he frequently utilized the quaint illustration of an elderly lady futilely sweeping back a flood-tide from her porch, concluding with the challenge: “Do we dam up the Pacific Ocean, or do we teach our kids to swim?”

In 1964, Akers accepted what turned out to be the first of three calls to serve at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He completed his doctoral dissertation during the following two years while teaching full-time in the education department. In addition, in 1965 he accepted another position as superintendent of all the Andrews laboratory schools (grades K-12).

At the same time, Akers was increasingly invited to speak at teacher education conferences, weeks of prayer, and other events. Not only was he an inspirational speaker with a considerable number of thought-provoking ideas, but he also looked a lot like the United States politician, Richard Nixon—an accident of genetics that would later come full circle.

Akers served at Andrews through 1969 after which he accepted a call to Walla Walla College, Washington, to be academic dean. He had to balance the demands of his new position with growing expectations for recruitment and public speaking. His stay at Walla Walla College was busy, but brief because in 1970 Akers accepted the call to be president of his alma mater Columbia Union College (CUC, formerly Washington Missionary College), where he served through 1974. The CUC years were eventful. Akers continued to advance the idea of Christian education as a pathway to service, and the Christian educator as one with the unique responsibility and ability to awaken both the mind and the heart. While remaining keenly aware of the need for academic rigor, and maintaining strong standards for accreditation and academic achievement, Akers also made it clear that the measure of any Christian school is not merely brick and mortar, but rather what happens in the lives of its students.

Akers' appearance bore a remarkable similarity to United States President Richard Nixon. No recounting of Akers' four years as president of Columbia Union College would be complete, without mention of the somewhat infamous Camp David² incident, which really did happen in 1970. While at an annual school picnic held near Camp David, Akers was persuaded to ride along with several students who, just for fun, wanted to visit the gate guards at the presidential retreat. Expecting to be quickly turned away by the guards, the group was instead quickly welcomed into the compound until it was discovered that Akers was not Nixon. It was a spur-of-the-moment episode that became larger than life, requiring Akers to answer curious and amazed questions, as well as to refute various rumors, for the rest of his life. While he said that he honestly came to regret that impulsive incident, which he was afraid would overshadow anything else he had achieved in and for Christian education, it did not prevent him from telling his story (at audiences' urging) for the last forty-five years of his life. Akers always enjoyed relating a good story, and the Camp David incident was all the more fascinating because it was so improbable, outlandish, and absolutely true (as later confirmed by a “Freedom of Information” request). The United States Secret Service considered it to be a major security breach, and the incident precipitated an

improvement in its security plan that had never before considered a presidential lookalike.³

In 1974, Akers returned to Andrews University for his second term of service, which lasted for more than a decade. His penchant for humor can be seen in the faculty biographical information form, where he included as one of his dependents: “‘Sheba’—90 lb. German Shepherd dog (who takes me for a walk 3 miles every day).”⁴ While Akers had the experience and background for many areas of education, including classroom teaching, curriculum and development, and leadership and management, his signature class was Philosophy of Christian Education—the topic about which he was most passionate, and which influenced every class and discipline. He also taught a graduate-level seminar in the philosophy of Christian education, a most significant and life-changing course. While Akers’ classes required the appropriate scholarship, study, and graduate-level projects, it was the interaction and discussion in class that had the most impact and influence on his students. To Akers, the subject-matter curriculum was important, but even more vital was how teachers related to students; that is, how they used the subject matter to challenge minds, to ignite a passion for learning while developing critical-thinking capability, always grounded in a biblical-spiritual dimension. Akers stated: “We have the opportunity in a school to expose our children to the finest things of life... [The mind] of children and youth is what we work with. Out of a Christian school should come young people who have taken the high road, unapologetically.”

During his time at Andrews University, Akers led the effort to establish religious education as a doctoral program. He also served in the early 1980s as the first dean of the School of Education at Andrews University. While Akers was fully and productively involved in the growth, development, and management of this new School of Education as well as his multiple classes, he continued to speak throughout the world on the topics he was passionate about Christian education; that is, the role of the teacher in school and character development, and the proper integration of faith and learning. In addition to making numerous presentations,⁵ Akers had articles published in various magazines⁶ on topics such as the essence and vital importance of true Christian education,⁷ and the integration of faith and learning.⁸

Global Leadership (1985-1990), and Lasting Impact

While Akers had been happy to settle into the challenges of Andrews University, the School of Education leadership, and teaching, he was called to one final service opportunity. As the General Conference (GC) president, Neal Wilson, put it: “To do some sky-writing for Adventist education.” And that is precisely what Akers did from 1985 to 1990, as he headed up the GC’s education department and coordinated the Church’s global education ministry. He also traveled extensively, logging thousands of miles as he visited various areas of the world to encourage Christian teachers and to emphasize the imperativeness of a truly balanced Christian education—a vital legacy of Akers’ lifework. During the late 1980s, Akers also recorded a six-part series of video-taped lectures for use in teacher education at Adventist colleges and universities. Furthermore, to provide additional recognition for teachers who provided evidence of years of successful work, Akers established a

commissioning service, similar to an ordination service for pastors.

After years of traveling around the world for Andrews University, conducting workshops, seminars, and extension courses, followed by five years as director of education for the Adventist Church with almost constant travel, overseas and domestically, Akers felt that it was time to stay home. Consequently, he retired at the end of his five-year term as education director. However, he returned to Andrews University as a “subsidized professor.” He was supposed to teach part-time, but ended up working full-time. He continued teaching in the School of Education, advising doctoral students, giving lectures, conducting seminars, giving baccalaureate or commencement addresses, writing articles, and traveling—although not overseas. Akers simply loved teaching, preaching, interacting with people, being involved in meaningful work, and thus hoped to make a difference in the lives he touched.

When George Akers penned his first message as a principal back at Philadelphia Academy in the early 1950s, he concluded that everything that happens at a Christian school was a part of God’s curriculum. A Christian school is more than scholasticism—more than just buildings, books and credits. For Akers, the words and context changed over the years, but he never wavered from that early conviction that what happens in the heart and mind for God is the most important purpose of any Christian school.

A Family Man—Death at 90

During Akers’ second tenure at Andrews University momentous changes happened in his family. Incidentally, Doug suffered an untimely death from leukemia in 2001. Akers became a grandfather of four grandchildren. Despite his rigorous work schedule, George Akers was always a doting grandfather who supported them whenever possible, in every major school and life event, including baptism, graduation, marriage, and the birth of his five great-grandchildren.

When Akers’ father, Captain Hillry Akers passed to his rest, the family assembled at the little Rock Hall church to say their farewell. The words which George Akers quoted from the poet Edwin Markham to say farewell to his father were repeated with equal meaning at his own funeral—

“As when a lordly cedar, green with boughs,
Goes down with a great shout upon the hills,
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky....”⁹

A devoted husband, father, son, brother, grandfather, great-grandfather, and friend to many, Dr. George Akers passed to his rest on February 4, 2017, in Collegedale, Tennessee, where he had retired fourteen years earlier!¹⁰ After the funeral service at the Collegedale Church, interment was at the Rose Hill Cemetery in Berrien Springs, Michigan.¹¹

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. In response to a request, Daniel Akers provided a link to a video tribute which was shared at the memorial for his father, Dr. George H. Akers. This eulogy, which Daniel had written up, together with additional sources as noted below, proved crucial in tracing the life -story of George Akers. See Daniel Akers, "Eulogy," YouTube, 2017, accessed December 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cYVfwj3whI&t=1s>.
2. Camp David is the official country retreat for the president of the United States located in Frederick County, Maryland.
3. For more on this incident, see Adam Crisp, "Local Man the Original 'Gate Crasher,'" *Chattanooga Free Times Press*, December 5, 2009, accessed December 31, 2018, <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/news/story/2009/dec/05/local-man-original-gate-crasher/245488/>.
4. Faculty Biographical Information, Document #007557, Center for Adventist Research, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, October 18, 1965 (updated October 28, 1974).
5. *Ibid.*, 22-25.
6. *Ibid.*, 21.
7. See, for example, George H. Akers, "All Thy Children Shall Be Taught of the Lord," *Journal of Adventist Education* 57, no. 5 (Summer 1995): 6-11; George H. Akers, "Proper Education," *Journal of Adventist Education* 52, no. 1 (October-November 1989): 8-11, 36-37.
8. See for example, George H. Akers, "Nurturing Faith in the Christian School," *Journal of Adventist Education* 56, no. 2 (December 1993/January 1994): 4-8.
9. From Edwin Markham, "Lincoln, Man of the People," accessed February 7, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51745/lincoln-man-of-the-people>.
10. "George H. Akers obituary," Dignity Memorial, 2017, accessed December 31, 2018, <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/chattanooga/george-akers-7281014>.
11. "George Hillry Akers obituary," *Southern Tidings*, May 2017, 30.

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