

# Vyhmeister, Werner K. (1931–2020)

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## LOVANOMENA ZANDRITIANA, AND SHAWNA VYHMEISTER

Lovanomena Zandritiana is a Malagasy serving as a student pastor at Biga Church in Silang Cavite, in the Philippines. Holding an M.A in Religion from Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, he is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in New Testament in the same institution.

Shawna Vyhmeister holds a Ph.D. in education, and is a professor and research director at Middle East University where she works with her husband. Vyhmeister and her husband, Ronald Vyhmeister, have lived and worked in Africa, Asia, South America, and the United States. Their two adult sons and their wives live in the United States. Her hobbies include music, writing, travel, birding, diving, reading, cooking, learning languages, and playing games. Her greatest joy is working for the Lord, especially if it involves young people.



Werner Vyhmeister.

Photo courtesy of Shawna Vyhmeister.

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Werner Konrad Vyhmeister, a visionary, minister, administrator, and educator, whose services spanned over six decades, left a major impact on the Adventist Church's mission throughout America, Asia, and Africa.

## Early Life

Werner Konrad Vyhmeister, the second of eight children<sup>1</sup> of Carlos Eugenio Walter Vyhmeister (1897-1981) and Guillermina Enriqueta Bishop (1906-1988), was born in Los Angeles, Chile, on September 5, 1931<sup>2</sup>. His maternal grandfather, Frederick William Bishop, along with Thomas Davis, were the first two volunteer Seventh-day Adventist colporteurs who brought the Adventist message to Chile.<sup>3</sup> Werner's father owned a foundry and machine shop in Los Angeles, which made all sorts of metal products and repaired agricultural equipment.<sup>4</sup>

From the age of six until early in World War II, Werner attended a German primary school. He completed the six grades mandated by Chile's government within four years. In March of 1942, Werner went to the Liceo de Hombres in Los Angeles for secondary school.<sup>5</sup> He gravitated towards reading books at an early age, borrowing from the library for extra reading in addition to classwork. The school he attended operated six days a week; however, the teachers overlooked Werner's absences every Saturday since he was a good student. To catch up,

he copied notes and got assignments from his classmates every Sunday. During that time he also learned French and added to his knowledge of English, which he had learned at home from his mother.<sup>6</sup> In January 1948 he passed the *Bachillerato* examination that allowed him to go to university.<sup>7</sup>

Growing up in an Adventist home, Werner attended church meetings regularly and was active in several church ministries. He and his siblings often played the piano for church meetings. In the summer of 1946, Werner was baptized in a small river on the outskirts of Los Angeles. During his secondary school years, Werner became passionate about evangelism. He traveled by bicycle to the countryside every Sabbath to hold worship services and do missionary work.<sup>8</sup>

## Education, Marriage, and Early Career

Werner started his higher education in March 1948, with a two-year ministerial degree from Chile Adventist College (Colegio Adventista de Chile).<sup>9</sup> As a working student, he would spend at least eight hours per week on duty as an assistant dormitory monitor. Sleepless nights continued when Werner became the head monitor, taking care of the lights. At the same time, he was the editor of *Alma Colegial*, the college yearbook. Throughout his studies, Werner was involved in various kinds of missionary work.

After earning his associate degree in theology, Werner went to the University of Chile in Santiago and took a five-year program in history and geography. To pay for their studies, during summers Werner and his brothers went from town to town, threshing crops for local farmers.<sup>10</sup> After four years Werner took a year's break from his degree and studies and accepted the request from Colegio Adventista de Chile (CACH) to fill a vacancy on their teaching staff. Werner went there to teach in 1954, after which he returned to the University of Chile in 1955 to complete his coursework and thesis. That year Werner was employed by the conference to pastor the La Paz Adventist Church. It was the first time in Werner's career that he was paid.<sup>11</sup> He obtained the *profesorado* (equivalent to a master's degree) in 1956.<sup>12</sup>

Upon completing his studies in Santiago in 1956, Werner returned to the CACH to teach theology courses and take up duties as general vice-president of the school. By 1957, feeling the need to increase his knowledge of theology, he went for one year to Potomac University in Washington, DC (the precursor of the seminary at Andrews University) to take classes toward a bachelor of divinity degree. As a working student, Werner attended class in the daytime and worked evenings and weekends. He worked as custodian at Washington Adventist Hospital, then he became the night watchman at the Review and Herald Publishing House. As he patrolled the building, he used his free moments to study.<sup>13</sup>

In June 1958 Werner was sent as a delegate to the 48th General Conference Session in Cleveland, Ohio, representing the Austral Union. While there, he met Nancy Weber, whose missionary mother was a delegate from Argentina.<sup>14</sup> In the days that followed, Werner and Nancy attended the sessions side-by-side and ate lunch together. By the end of the ten-day session, their friendship had become evident.<sup>15</sup>

During the months following the GC session, Werner traveled to the Near East, where he continued to develop his interest in archaeology and history, while Nancy accepted her first teaching assignment at Mountain View Academy in California. As Werner explored Bible lands, he wrote to Nancy and received her letters at the post office in each city he visited, because he had provided her with a precise itinerary of his trip, including dates and locations.<sup>16</sup> The trip was a success, even though Werner had to spend the night in a Turkish jail because of a misunderstanding over currency exchange.<sup>17</sup>

In 1959, after his three-month land tour in the Near East, Werner returned to the Adventist University of Chile to teach archaeology, Greek, church history, and other classes. By Christmas, after consulting with his parents, he wrote Nancy and asked for her hand in marriage. By this time, Nancy's mother was again working in Argentina, near where Nancy had spent years as a child.<sup>18</sup> So, when she replied in the affirmative, it was agreed that the wedding would be held in Argentina.

On July 12, 1959, Werner and Nancy were married.<sup>19</sup> Immediately after the wedding they began the trip back to Chile, where Werner was teaching. The three-day trip via bus and train was their honeymoon. A year after their marriage the couple had their first child, Heidi. Two years later, Ronald followed.

## Career and Ministry

Werner became the assistant director of the college in 1960. This was in addition to being the head of the department of theology and teaching a full load of theology classes.

In 1961 Werner and his family moved to Argentina to teach at River Plate Adventist College (Colegio Adventista del Plata). He was ordained to the gospel ministry on December 20, 1961.

In 1966 the Vyhmeisters were granted a study leave to go to Andrews University. With his master of divinity degree completed in 1967, he returned to South America where he completed his PhD in history from the University of Chile in 1968, with a dissertation titled "The Impact of English Calvinist Thought on the Thinking about Church and State during the Reign of Elizabeth I."

Upon his return from graduate studies in 1968, Werner served as professor, head of the theology department, and vice-president of the entire college, a role he held until 1971.<sup>20</sup> His favorite course was archaeology. The records show that Werner had more than 2,000 slides in archaeology to present in class.<sup>21</sup>

In 1972 Werner began serving as education director for the South American Division, so he and his family of four relocated to division headquarters in Montevideo, Uruguay. He traveled over all the countries of the division to supervise Adventist educational institutions.<sup>22</sup> His work included institutions from elementary through university level. Although he did well in that capacity, Werner's preference was for classroom duties rather than travel and supervision. Towards the end of 1974, he received a call to be a faculty member at Andrews University. After the 1975 General Conference Session in Vienna, Werner became a missionary to North America, teaching in the

mission department (1975-1984) at the SDA Theological Seminary.<sup>23</sup> Beginning in February 1976, Werner also taught in the Institute of World Mission at Andrews, training mission appointees.<sup>24</sup> In 1981 Werner was appointed associate dean of the seminary and professor of mission (1981-1984).<sup>25</sup>

While teaching at the Andrews Seminary, Werner recognized a problem with centralized graduate theological education. He found that the world Church sent their brightest students to be educated at Andrews, but often they did not return to their home country upon completion of their degree programs. Werner began developing theological education based in the home divisions. The new model was a division-wide graduate program where students would be kept close to home and maintain their employment while the faculty would travel around to teach them.<sup>26</sup> In 1980 the Seminario Adventista Latinoamericano de Teologia (SALT), serving the South American Division, was the first fruit of the new model, offering an MA in religion.<sup>27</sup> This educational model has proven to be more efficient, cost-effective, and relevant to the local context.

In 1984 Werner transitioned to the deanship/presidency of the Asia Adventist Theological Seminary in the Far East, located on the campus of Philippine Union College, now the Adventist University of Philippines (AUP).<sup>28</sup> Before going to the Philippines, Werner led a tour of Greece and Turkey, focusing on the seven churches of Revelation and other historical spots such as Patmos, Antioch, Cappadocia, and Mount Ararat.<sup>29</sup>

In 1985 the Far Eastern Division decided to transform the division-supported Seminary and Graduate School at PUC into a separate division-operated institution.<sup>30</sup> Although this decision was not warmly welcomed by some of the local Church administrators, with the assistance of local authorities and support of the Far Eastern Division, the new institution was granted Presidential Decree No. 2021 in 1986, establishing the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS).<sup>31</sup> As the first president of the new institution, Werner and the other administrators laid the groundwork for the new international graduate school and seminary, while Nancy taught courses in biblical studies and research.<sup>32</sup> In the summer of 1988, the doctor of pastoral studies program became the first doctoral program.<sup>33</sup> During his time at AIAS, a number of off-campus extension programs were also started, many of which remain today.

In 1989 Werner accepted the call to be dean of the Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.<sup>34</sup> He did not take up the new position, however, until his replacement arrived at AIAS in January 1991.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to Andrews University, Werner worked closely with faculty and administration to design new programs and to enlarge the seminary building. New degree courses were offered for professionals interested in having basic theological training.<sup>36</sup> Nancy was asked to edit *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* and to teach world missions, Greek, and research methods.<sup>37</sup>

Werner was a dedicated academician who always committed himself to excellence. He authored a number of documents and scholarly articles within his area of expertise in Spanish, Portuguese, and English.<sup>38</sup> Some of his contributions include "The History of Heshbon from Literary Sources" (1968) and "A Problem We Dare Not

Ignore” (1981).

Throughout his career, Werner received a number of awards and commendations. At Allias, Werner was honored with the Outstanding Recognition Award. At Andrews University, Werner received the J. N. Andrews Medallion and a medal as Honored Alumnus of 1993. Recognized for his service in Christian education through the years, Werner received the General Conference Education Department Medallion of Distinction in 1999.<sup>39</sup> However, Werner reportedly never displayed these awards; his main concern was to do the job well.

## Later Life

By mid-2000 the Vyhmeisters retired from full-time educational service and settled in Yucaipa, California. Shortly afterward, in 2003, the African Church leaders decided to establish advanced theological education in Africa.

Renowned for his experience, Werner was summoned by the General Conference to present his extension model, used in South America and Asia, to the African leaders. Werner’s model was adopted, and he and Nancy laid the groundwork for what would become the Adventist University of Africa (AUA). Werner and Nancy traveled to visit the Adventist colleges in the region, explaining the system and making arrangements for classes. AUA began in 2006, initially based on three campuses: Babcock University in Nigeria, the University of East Africa-Baraton in Kenya, and Solusi College in Zimbabwe, with the administrative offices located next to the East-Central Africa Division office in Nairobi.<sup>40</sup>

Even in retirement, Werner continued serving in the local church and supporting Adventist theological education worldwide. In 2005 the General Conference invited Werner and Nancy to evaluate the college in Costa Rica. In 2007 they were asked to evaluate the multi-campus Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo (UNASP), Brazil.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Werner frequently traveled throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa to hold classes on these continents.

In 2008 Werner received a call from the General Conference to go to Belem, Brazil, to help prepare a proposal for a new college. After six weeks, he and Nancy returned with the completed proposal to the General Conference. The proposal made by Werner was accepted, and now Amazonia Adventist College (Faculdade Adventista da Amazônia—FAAMA) is a reality, serving the Amazon region of Brazil.

By 2010 Werner started to experience memory deficits, and he could no longer write or teach; however, he continued to enjoy family visits, walks, and picnics outdoors. In March 2020 Werner caught pneumonia, and on March 21, at the age of 88, he breathed his last.

## Contribution

Werner Konrad Vyhmeister was an accomplished educator who made a lasting impact on the Adventist Church. He was noted for his innovative leadership and commitment to excellence.<sup>42</sup> One of his greatest strengths as a

leader was his mastery of details while seeing the big picture.<sup>43</sup> His years of unwavering dedication to denominational service resulted in unprecedented advances in Adventist theological education worldwide. The Adventist historian George Knight states that Werner “was the most influential person in Adventist higher education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>44</sup>

Werner Vyhmeister was a man of vision who worked quietly and persistently towards the goal, despite opposition. One of his most notable administrative legacies was the model of school extensions and division-wide graduate programs. This began with the initiation of SALT in South America. This model was later adapted in Inter-America (SETAI), Southeast Asia (AIIAS), and Africa (AUA), and also at the Andrews University Theological Seminary. Werner was integral in designing and setting up each of these programs. This educational system has produced many, if not most, of the current Church leaders worldwide.

Werner was a family man, remembered by his children as a loving and supportive father who made time for his family, despite his full load of responsibilities.<sup>45</sup> The record shows that Werner never applied for a job. He simply accepted wherever God called him to serve.

As a leader, Werner is remembered for his constant warm smile. He was considered the go-to person for any kind of issue. Werner is credited with patient, people-oriented leadership to all colleagues and employees under his care.<sup>46</sup>

Werner was a strong advocate of spirituality and mission. He upheld Adventist education as “cities of refuge,” where students could be protected from the secular influence of the world.<sup>47</sup> He felt that the work began on the inside, with personal spirituality and prayer. In his words, “If we truly want to be the light of the world, our primary concern should be to have God in entire possession of our lives. . . . Prayer is the most powerful weapon we have in our hands to work for the conversion of the world.”<sup>48</sup>

Werner’s life demonstrated what it means to be a servant under God’s leading.

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## NOTES

1. Walter, Werner, Gerald, Lucy, Edwin, twins Ellen and Enid, and Mirna Helga—all of whom completed college and were employed in denominational service. See, Kenneth H. Wood, "Werner K. Vyhmeister," *ARH*, November 5, 1981, 2; Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," unpublished manuscript, 2016, AIIAS Leslie Hardinge Library, Archives, Institutional Documents, AIIAS Presidents. Accessed January 25, 2021.
2. Werner K. Vyhmeister, Service Record.
3. Wood, "Werner K. Vyhmeister." *ARH*, 158:45; Sharon Terrell, "Andrews University News," *Lake Union Herald*, June 1, 1991, 13.
4. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 2.
5. Ronald and Heidi Vyhmeister, "Life Sketch Werner Vyhmeister," 2020.
6. As the daughter of an English-speaking missionary father and a German-speaking mother, Werner's mother spoke both languages, as well as Spanish, which she spoke on the street. Personal communication, Nancy Vyhmeister, March 15, 2022.
7. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 8.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. Werner K. Vyhmeister, Service Record.
10. Ronald and Heidi Vyhmeister, "Life Sketch Werner Vyhmeister," 2020.
11. Ibid.
12. Werner K. Vyhmeister, Service Record.
13. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 11.
14. Noelene Johnson, "Missionaries: are they still needed?" *ARH*, October 20, 1983, 28.
15. In those days, delegates from the same division not only sat together during the sessions, but also stayed in the same hotel. John M. Fowler, "Talking About Servant Leaders," *ARH*, July 4, 2005, 2.
16. Ronald and Heidi Vyhmeister, "Life Sketch Werner Vyhmeister," 2020.
17. Ibid.
18. Nancy grew up as a missionary child in Uruguay, and her father, who was the farm manager at the college in Argentina, was killed by a bull when she was 17. Nancy Vyhmeister, personal communication, March 15, 2022.
19. Werner K. Vyhmeister, Service Record.
20. Ibid.
21. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "The Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 22.
22. Ronald & Heidi Vyhmeister, "Life Sketch Werner Vyhmeister," 2020.
23. Ibid.
24. Alexis Carrel, "Institute of World Mission at Andrews," *Australasian Record*, May 31, 1976, 7.
25. "Hirsch Appointed Board Chairman" *Lake Union Herald*, February 2, 1982, 2.
26. Ronald and Heidi Vyhmeister, "Life Sketch Werner Vyhmeister," 2020.
27. It was a summer session with forty-eight students from the Mexican and Central American union. Dr. Werner Vyhmeister taught Growth of the Church. Alwyn Nicholas, "Montemorelos University," *Inter-America News Flashes*, September 20, 1983, 1.



28. Sharnie Love Zamora-Belardino, "Remembering Werner Konrad Vyhmeister, 1931-2020," *Flags the Allias Magazine*, 15:2 (October 2020), 24.
29. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 2016, 30.
30. Sharnie Love Zamora-Belardino, "Remembering Werner Konrad Vyhmeister, 1931-2020," 24.
31. *Ibid.*, 24.
32. Sharon Terrell, "Andrews University News," *Lake Union Herald*, June 1, 1991, 13; Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 2016, 11.
33. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 11.
34. Sharon Terrell, "Andrews University News," 13.
35. *Ibid.*, 13.
36. "Divinity Degree Courses offered for Professionals" *Lake Union Herald*, August 16, 1983, 5.
37. Kenneth A. Strand, "A Note on AUSS Staff Change," *Andrews Seminary Studies*, 29:3, 1991, 115.
38. Sharon Terrell, "Andrews University News," 13.
39. Nancy J. Vyhmeister, "the Biography of Werner Vyhmeister," 42.
40. *Ibid.*, 43.
41. *Ibid.*, 44.
42. Marcos Paseggi, "Visionary Ministerial Educator Werner Vyhmeister Passes to His Rest at 88," *Adventist Review*, (April 11, 2020), retrieved on January 28, 2022, from <https://adventistreview.org/news/visionary-ministerial-educator-werner-vyhmeister-passes-to-his-rest-at-88/>.
43. See Roy Ryan speech in "Dr. Werner Vyhmeister Memorial Services," 37:13.
44. Christian Prohaska, "Dr. Werner Vyhmeister Memorial Services," March 21, 2020, (Youtube Video, 50:30), retrieved on January 28, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqDOMjiAt8M>.
45. See Heidi and Ronald Vyhmeister's discussion on Werner Vyhmeister as a father in "Dr. Werner Vyhmeister Memorial Services," (Youtube Video, 37:13).
46. Sharnie Love Zamora-Belardino, "Remembering Werner Konrad Vyhmeister, 1931-2020," 24.

47. Werner K. Vyhmeister, "A Problem We Dare Not Ignore 1," *ARH*, November 5, 1981, 6; He also convinced church members on the importance of Christian education. See Walter Weiss, "Wanted-A New Academy," *World Mission Report*, January 1, 1979, 5.

48. Werner K. Vyhmeister, "Prayer, Power, and Perseverance," *ARH*, January 4, 1973, 6.

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