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## PROFILE

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# HELEN WARD THOMPSON

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### Dialogue with the Academic VP of Loma Linda University

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**H**elen Ward Thompson received her undergraduate education at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington. She majored in English

and physical education, and began her professional career as an instructor in English and assistant dean of women at La Sierra College. She earned her master's degree in English from Stanford University in 1955 and in the same year became dean of women and professor of English at Walla Walla College. She served in this role for ten years, and in 1965 earned her doctorate in English from Stanford. She then chaired the Walla Walla College English Department for eleven years.

In 1976 she accepted the position of academic dean at Southwestern Adventist College in Keene, Texas. Following her marriage in 1979 to Dr. Thomas Thompson, she returned to Walla Walla College to serve as director of alumni affairs. In 1984 she be-

came the vice president for academic administration at Loma Linda University.

In recent years this institution, with its beautiful campus in southern California, has been prominent in world news because of the Baby Fae heart transplant and other pioneering surgical procedures. Recognized as a leading research center in various areas of medicine, health, and ethics, Loma Linda University is the anchor institution for the global Adventist health system.

When the Board of Trustees appointed Dr. Helen Thompson as the university's vice-president for academic administration, she became the highest ranking woman in Adventist academia.

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**D**r. Thompson, do you see your current appointment as a breakthrough for other women? Are there any advantages to having a woman in this position?

I rarely think about it. But when I do, I suppose it's in one of two ways. When I find that I am the only woman in a group or committee, I realize that this is a unique appointment. Also, now and then I realize that it is a different experience for my colleagues to relate to a woman in this office. In general, the people I relate to accept me for the quality of my work, not for the fact that I am a woman.

I have learned to distinguish between assessment of my work and prejudice because I am a woman. It would be easy for me to assume that when someone does not agree

with me, it is because I am a woman. I've tried to guard against that.

I don't know that my position says very much about possibilities for other women. Although as a church we are becoming more open in hiring the person best qualified for the job, change is slow. For a woman to be qualified for leadership roles, she must be allowed into the "pipeline." That is partly related to the quality of her work. But as I think about the many competent women I have known over the years, success is

also related to the willingness of male leaders to place women in advantageous roles.

An educational institution, in fact any structure, is advantaged by having a mix in central administration. Women are frank in telling me that they are happy I am here, that I bring a different perspective than a man would. Here and at Southwestern Adventist College, students and faculty have appreciated a feminine perspective on the administrative level, a special understanding of women and their needs. Since most colleges and university campuses are more than 50 percent women (LLU is 51 percent), we do need to represent them at top administrative levels.

**How did you become a Seventh-day Adventist?**

When I attended public high school in Washington State, a neighbor took me to Sabbath School with her children. Ultimately, I read my way into the church and was baptized. I graduated from high school and then chose to attend a Seventh-day Adventist college.

**In what way do your beliefs influence your decisions and plans? Would you act differently in a non-Adventist setting?**

My beliefs have a major influence on my decisions and plans. We begin our work at this university on the basis that we are an Adventist institution. So all decisions and plans are related to that position. We want to turn out people who are well educated, interested in service, and committed to the church. I would act differently in a non-Adventist setting.

**What are the major satisfactions you derive from your work?**

I am impressed with the quality of the student body. On both campuses, students are able, eager scholars, and I appreciate that quality. For the most part they are also committed Christians.

I enjoy my contacts with the faculty. They are true scholars and excellent teachers. My work with the deans of the schools is especially rewarding. They are hard-working administrators, deeply committed to providing academic quality and fostering Adventist Christian values in their students.

**How does Loma Linda University provide support for the mission of the Adventist Church at home and abroad?**

We are producing graduates who are capable in their fields, who are service oriented and committed to the church. Wherever I go, I find Loma Linda graduates deeply involved in their professions, their communities, and their churches. Many of our schools—such as Health, Dentistry, and Medicine—have programs abroad. In addition, Hong Kong

Adventist College is affiliated with us, so that certain students there can receive Loma Linda University credit. Our School of Education offers classes at several sites around the North American Division as well as in Australia and Costa Rica. The Family Life Education program is offered in Australia, and Respiratory Therapy in Saudi Arabia.

**Looking back on the Baby Face case, do you think it was positive for Loma Linda University and the church?**

The heart transplant program surely brought the university and the church into world prominence. Loma Linda University currently has \$5 million of funded research projects. We hope to increase that to \$10 million or more in the next few years. In addition to Dr. Leonard Bailey, quite a number of our researchers are well known in the scientific world. Dr. Lawrence Longo and his group, Dr. Brian Bull, the researchers in the School of Health, and many others are creating an active research base here. We're doing all we can in administration to encourage our research community.

**How do you balance your professional life with your home life?**

It's not always easy. But I have a supportive husband who shared the decision with me to take this position. I work intensely from Monday morning to Friday midafternoon. But I try to reserve carefully the weekends for extra home life.

**How do you keep your spiritual life alive? How do you find the time?**

The highlight of the week for me is the Sabbath. Thomas and I usually go for a long walk, then to Sabbath School, and after that to church services. On Sabbath afternoons, we choose from the many activities and discussion groups in the area. In addition, we both read avidly and have good conversations with each other and with friends about this life and the life to come. Many people living in our university environment are scholars in theology and Christian thought. We find discussions with them most rewarding. Besides that, I pray a lot.

**Does your present position allow you to share your faith in a personal way with others? How do you go about doing it?**

We are in an Adventist institution that is committed to the spiritual life and to the needs of humanity. Spiritual values and concepts are always central in our work. We don't take this for granted. For example, we have set up a special university committee to review how our religion can best be structured into the curriculum to enrich the spiritual lives of our students. The university senate included this committee and its study as an item in our faculty retreat. In addition, the challenges of administration provide many opportunities to share the security and joy we have in Jesus.

**What advice would you give to younger women looking forward to successful careers in academia?**

Do good work. Be a scholar in your discipline. If you intend to go into administration, then become a scholar of administration—its theories, its practices. Learn administrative skills through involvement at the structural levels available to you. Be willing to give full service and more. Finally, expect to enjoy it.

Richard Weismeyer