

*From Loma Linda University and Medical Center's earliest beginnings, spirituality and teaching religion have played an important role in our institutional philosophy of healing and wholeness. This article is the first of a three-part series highlighting our religion faculty. This first article highlights the career of William George Wirth, who was our first religion faculty member to hold a PhD.*

"Bill" Wirth (as he was called) was born in New York City to immigrant parents in 1884. Both he and his mother attended evangelistic meetings by E.E. Franke. He experienced a deep spiritual awakening and chose to be baptized. Bill found employment with the construction crews at Washington Missionary College (now Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland), where he worked his way through school.

Partway through his college program he transferred to Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska (accredited through the University of Nebraska), so that he could graduate from an accredited program. After graduation he taught briefly at Campion Academy in Loveland, Colorado. It was here that he met H.M.S. Richards, one of his students, and the two became lifelong friends—Dr. Wirth became a lifelong mentor to Dr. Richards. Dr. Wirth also met and married Lillie Wolfram in 1911.

The two went together to work at South Lancaster Academy in New England, and in 1918 taught briefly at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. It was while he was there that W.C. White (who lived nearby) encouraged him to obtain further education. His decision to attend graduate school was extremely controversial and other Church leaders tried to dissuade Dr. Wirth from attending a "worldly" graduate school (at a time when many conservative Christian groups frowned

upon modernist, liberal graduate programs). Despite these cautions he enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. He obtained an MA and a PhD, completing the latter in 1923.

As he was nearing the end of his graduate program, Drs. Percy T. Magan and Newton Evans traveled to Berkeley to recruit Dr. Wirth to teach at the Los Angeles Division of the College of Medical Evangelists. Both administrators felt that it was important to have a religion teacher who had academic qualifications that matched