

# The Call for Black Unions

by Benjamin Reeves

“**T**o God be the Glory” — these words expressed the emotions filling the hearts of over 400 black Seventh-day Adventist workers and their families as they gathered in the Oakwood College church on March 24, 1978. The occasion was the meeting of all regional conference presidents and over 90 percent of the workers of those conferences. In attendance as well were black union and General Conference personnel. The central concern was the clarification of questions concerning regional or black unions in the Adventist Church.

As most of those present recognized, the issue of black unions has a long history. As long ago as April 7-9, 1969, a meeting of the Regional Advisory Committee held in Miami recommended that the General Conference appoint a committee to study the advisability of organizing regional unions. On October 9, 1969, the appointed General Conference committee further recommended that a commission be appointed to study regional unions. On January 13, 1970, the

Commission to Study Regional Unions met in the General Conference chapel. After spending some fifteen hours together, the commission tabled a motion that the Church organize two new unions.

Following the meeting, General Conference officers prepared a document setting forth alternatives to black unions and presented it to the commission on April 16, 1970. During that meeting, after a twelve-hour discussion, a motion to form regional unions was defeated by a vote of 41 to 28. Following an appeal for church unity by E. E. Cleveland, the alternative “Sixteen-Point Program” prepared by the General Conference officers was accepted in lieu of black unions. After one year, the commission was to be reconvened to further study and evaluate the program.

Since the 1970 meeting, no other meetings have been called, although the intervening time did see blacks placed in union administrative positions. Many observers interpreted these appointments as hopeful signs suggesting that after gaining union experience in executive positions, blacks would be eligible to serve in union presidential positions. However, this interpretation was mistaken. Since the 1970 meeting, three unions — Lake, Central, Columbia — have elected

presidents. In every case, qualified blacks with extensive conference and union administrative experience who served as union secretaries for extended periods were passed over.

Regional unions were again proposed by black conference presidents in 1977, when a request was presented to PREXAD to establish regional unions. PREXAD, however, rejected the proposal and set up another commission to study alternative means of correcting organizational inequities. A meeting of black conference presidents with General Conference Regional officers then again requested that PREXAD restudy the proposed regional unions.

Because PREXAD released a statement in the *Review and Herald* without providing a balancing opposition statement, black conference presidents decided that it was necessary to provide the balancing information both to laymen and ministers. Thus they chose to discuss the issue at the Oakwood meeting and to print a brochure. The Oakwood meeting was chaired by C. D. Joseph, president of the Lake Region Conference, and the brochure was edited by R. C. Brown, secretary of the conference. Prior to the meeting, 40,000 copies of the brochure were printed.

The Oakwood meeting noted that Adventist church structure has systematically excluded blacks from crucial organizational positions. This exclusion is tragic because, as the opening speaker E. E. Cleveland pointed

out, the natural outgrowth of the Three Angel's Message is an awakening sense of self-worth and an increasing desire to serve at all levels of church structure. Also during the meeting, C. D. Joseph described the relationship between church organization and the enlargement of God's work, and C. E. Dudley, president of the South Central Conference, described how the black work has been strengthened under black administration. Isaac Palmer, treasurer of the Lake Region Conference, argued that percentages of tithe returned to the black conferences should be adjusted to compensate for the economic inequities of American life. C. B. Rock, president of Oakwood College, concluded the meeting by describing the New Testament church's use of Gentile leadership to administer Gentile churches. Rock noted that the resulting diversity in leadership added to the unity of the early church.

Since the Oakwood meeting, the regional presidents, along with C. B. Rock and E. E. Cleveland, were invited to Spring Council to discuss black concerns. The question of black unions was once again referred to the PREXAD-appointed commission, which will report to the Annual Council. A matter of some discussion was whether the 40,000 copies of the brochure will be distributed by the regional conference presidents to their constituencies before the 1978 Annual Council. Meanwhile, the General Conference is considering a brochure to explain its position.