

Adventism's Rainbow Coalition

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By Roy Branson

An understanding of the roots of the diverse groups in Adventism, particularly its largest ethnic community—black Adventists—will help us to appreciate better each other's struggles and concerns.

Probably no church in the world embraces more ethnic communities than the Seventh-day Adventist. One hundred fifty-six years after the Great Disappointment, almost 90 percent of Seventh-day Adventists live outside the United States. Adventists worship in more countries than do members of any other church except the Roman Catholic. Even among the 10 percent of Adventists who live in the United States, the majority are nonwhite.

Embracing fellow believers who look, talk, and act differently from ourselves has been one of Adventism's more dramatic pilgrimages. The road to ethnic diversity has been rough sometimes—and it may get rougher. We can learn much from how our founders wrestled in the United States to combine appreciation of cultural differences with a sense of unity and common purpose.

Adventism was begun and initially led in the nineteenth century by WASPS—white Anglo-Saxon Protestants—living in New England and upper New York. For a few years after the Great Disappointment, the founders believed that God would take to heaven only those who had accepted him before 1844. In effect, their “Shut-Door” teaching primarily permitted WASPS into heaven. Even after they changed their minds and opened this door, Adventists took years to welcome whites who were not Anglo-Saxons.

As with the United States as a whole, the most complicated ethnic relationship among Seventh-day Adventists has been between whites and blacks. In America, the relationship has formed a recurring pattern: As relationships between blacks and whites change in general society, some event creates a crisis in black-white relations; black members make certain demands; the white majority refuses; and, instead, whites institute changes that blacks had demanded during a previous crisis.

The dynamics of race relations and encounters between whites and blacks in the Adventist Church have had far-reaching effects and considerable historic impact on the entire denomination. This article gives considerable attention to the development of the black work because it reveals prevalent attitudes on the subject of black-white relations in Adventism. . . .

Millerites and Abolitionism

Black Adventists trace their roots to the Millerites. William Foy, a black man, received visions from 1842 to 1844 similar to those that Ellen White saw early in 1844. She said that Foy had four visions and that she once talked to him after she had spoken at a meeting. Foy told her that he had seen some of the same scenes. Ellen White also recalled hearing him speak in Portland when she was a girl and said that he bore “remarkable testimonies.” For

years it was believed that Foy gave up Christianity after refusing to share his visions and that he died in 1845, shortly after the Great Disappointment. Foy actually lived until 1893. These and other misconceptions are cleared up in the book *The Unknown Prophet*, by Delbert Baker.¹

The Founders' Theology on Race

Six years after the Great Disappointment, Ellen White urged civil disobedience in the cause of antislavery. When Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, she told Sabbath-keeping Adventists in no uncertain terms that



C. M. KINNEY, FRONT ROW 1ST ON LEFT; EDSON WHITE, FRONT ROW, CENTER (PHOTO COURTESY OF G.C. ARCHIVES)

"the law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey."² When she learned about one particular Adventist who defended slavery, she bluntly admonished him: "You must yield your views or the truth. . . . We must let it be known that we have no such ones in our fellowship, that we will not walk with them in church capacity."³ At a time when many, even in the North, considered slavery a commercial or political issue, Ellen White regarded it as a moral outrage.

It would have been possible for Ellen White to believe in the abolition of slavery and yet not regard black persons as equal to whites, but she was unequivocal: "Christ came to this earth with a message of mercy and forgiveness. He laid the foundation for a religion by which Jew and Gentile, black and white, free and bond, are linked together in one common brotherhood, recognized as equal in the sight of God."⁴ Not only were redeemed Christians equal in Christ, but blacks and

whites were equal brothers because of a common creation. God wants us, she reminded whites about blacks, to remember "their common relationship to us by creation and by redemption, and their right to the blessings of freedom."⁵

James White, the organizational leader of Sabbath-keeping Adventists, declared that oppression of slaves in America offered significant evidence that the beast in the book of Revelation, chapter 13, was the United States, a beast that looked like a lamb but spoke like a dragon.

When the Civil War began, President Abraham Lincoln had not yet announced the Emancipation Proclamation and said that he fought only to save the Union, not to free the slaves. Uriah Smith, who succeeded James White as editor of the *Review and Herald*, used the pages of Adventism's official church paper to pronounce an anathema on the president for not emancipating the slaves immediately.

As individuals, the first black Seventh-day Adventists were scattered through northern churches, but the first congregation of black members was organized in the South. One of the earliest black Adventists, Harry Lowe, a former Baptist preacher, joined a biracial church in Edgefield Junction, Tennessee, near Nashville, then, in 1886, because of racial tensions, led in the formation of a black congregation of ten members. The first black Seventh-day

Adventist to become an ordained minister, C. M. Kinney, was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia, converted to Adventism in Reno, Nevada, then for two years attended Healdsburg College, in northern California. Kinney preached in Kansas before moving on to a successful ministry in Kentucky and Tennessee. By 1890, a second predominately black Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized, this one in Louisville, Kentucky.

In the early 1890s, Ellen White spelled out for General Conference officers what equality between whites and blacks—based on her theology of both redemption and creation—meant in the practical life of the Church.

It will always be a difficult matter to deal with the prejudices of the white people in the South and do missionary work for the colored race. But the way this matter has been treated by some is an offense to God. . . . You have no

license from God to exclude the colored people from your places of worship. Treat them as Christ's property, which they are, just as much as yourselves. They should hold membership in the Church with the white brethren.⁶

James and Ellen White's oldest son, Edson, took his parents' theology of ethnic and race relations seriously. The result was crucial for relations between whites and blacks in the American Adventist Church. In 1895, he built a boat, called it the *Morning Star*, and with some white colleagues, sailed it down the Mississippi River. He and his friends conducted religious meetings, health clinics, and classes in reading, writing, and farming for black Southerners along the river towns of Mississippi.

However, in 1895, white plantation owners started to oppose Edson's *Morning Star* mission. In addition, black preachers, fearful of losing members, also incited whites against the Adventists. The result was violent attacks, burnings, and attempted lynchings. Edson White had sailed into what some

historians of the South have called the "Crisis of the Nineties." It was a time, according to Yale historian C. Vann Woodward, when "a great restiveness seized upon the populace, a more profound upheaval of economic discontent than had ever moved the southern people before, more profound in its political manifestation than that which shook them in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Economic, political, and social frustrations pyramided social tensions, which broke out into aggression against blacks and sometimes against their white friends."⁷

Finally, in 1899, Ellen White reluctantly began to counsel caution: "As far as possible, everything that will stir up the race prejudice of the white people should be avoided. There is a danger of closing the door so that our white laborers will not be able to work in some places in the South." She also added a famous promise to black Adventists: "Let them understand that this plan is to be followed until the Lord shows us a better way." Ellen White remained committed to equality between

blacks and whites based on God's work of salvation and creation, but after the experience of her son in the mid-1890s she became more pragmatic about how to apply racial equality in specific circumstances.⁸

The Creation of the Negro Department

By the time of the 1909 General Conference session, there were about one thousand black Adventists, and the first crisis in relations between whites and blacks had hit the denomination. L. C. Shaefer, formerly a Baptist preacher and probably the most prominent black preacher in Adventism, had been invited to pastor the integrated, though predominately black, First Seventh-day Adventist Church of Washington, D.C. One of its

J. L. McElhenny



G. E. Peters

W. H. Branson



Uriah Smith

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members was the daughter of Frederick Douglass, the most famous black person of his time and a witness, he said, to the falling of the stars in 1833.

Prominent members of the Church felt that the newly elected General Conference president, A. G. Daniells, wanted black and white Adventists to worship in separate congregations. As the newly reorganized General Conference moved from Battle Creek, Michigan, to Washington, D.C., General Conference officers left the First Church to organize other, white congregations. The General Conference committee refused to assign a white pastor to assist Shaefer in an evangelistic campaign. J. H. Howard, a black physician in First Church, expressing views shared by Shaefer, wrote to Daniells that "it is difficult to see why it is necessary to make a race line in the Adventist denomination in face of the fact that the truth involves a positive protest against any such thing in the Church."

By the time of the 1909 General Conference

session, the demands of the black leaders had become specific. J. K. Humphrey, pastor of the Harlem First Church, made his case on the floor of the session by appealing to the denomination's earlier efforts on behalf of white ethnics. "As I studied the situation, I found that the other nationalities were getting along first-rate. . . . It encourages you to listen to these reports of how the work is going among the Germans, Danes, Scandinavians and others; but when it comes to the Negroes, do you hear anything?"⁹

A. G. Daniells strongly supported the creation of the Negro Department. Like Humphrey, he cited the precedent of the General Conference's Foreign Department, which was formed especially for work among Scandinavian and German immigrants. Sydney Scott made the most fiery speech of the discussion, concluding that "there ought to be a just and fair representation

Crisis in Harlem

At the same time that Adventists—and Americans generally—were regressing in race relations, blacks in northern cities became more militant. This was the time of social and literary activity in New York City. The post-World War I period was also the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of artistic and literary talent that included a number of Caribbean immigrants and, later, an author named Arna Bontemps, who came from an Adventist minister's family. Bontemps served as principal of Adventist Harlem Academy and taught briefly at Oakwood College before becoming writer in residence at Fisk University and visiting professor for six years at Yale and the University of Chicago. In 1928, during this period of increasing ferment, W. H. Green,

the first black secretary of the Negro Department, died. He had led the department for a decade. Black Adventist pastors were disappointed in how little had been accomplished by the department since 1909. They proposed that the General Conference abolish the Negro De-

"LET THEM UNDERSTAND THAT THIS PLAN IS TO BE FOLLOWED UNTIL THE LORD SHOWS US A BETTER WAY."
—ELLEN G. WHITE

in that department from the local mission clear to the head" and that the name of the department should be "Afro-American."

Scott and the other black leaders got their department, but not the suggested name. Nor did they get representation. The first secretary leading the Negro Department was a white man, as were many of his successors. It would be nine years before the first black leader, W. H. Green, headed the department.

After World War I, crowds in America's cities cheered returning black regiments. But when the black veterans began to claim the rights and privileges of American citizens, whites fiercely resisted. Between 1916 and 1913, one-half to one million southern blacks migrated to northern jobs. In just two years (1919-20), 100,000 whites joined Ku Klux Klan chapters in twenty-three states. In the summer of 1919, no fewer than twenty-five major riots broke out in American cities. One in Chicago lasted thirteen days, wounding hundreds and killing thirty-eight.

partment and replace it with black conferences; one black General Conference leader would be succeeded by several black conference presidents.

The most obvious candidate for president of a black conference was J. K. Humphrey. Nineteen years before, in the aftermath of Schaefer's departure from the denomination, Humphrey had stood with A. G. Daniells, the General Conference president, and helped him create the Negro Department. Humphrey, originally an ordained Baptist pastor on the island of Jamaica, pastored the Adventist First Church of Harlem. The Church was made up primarily of West Indian immigrants, in a Harlem being ignited by West Indian ideas of self-determination. Under Humphrey's leadership, the congregation became the largest in the Greater New York Conference. He had also started three other congregations.

A spring 1929 meeting of General Conference leaders in Washington, D.C., failed to approve the creation of black conferences and instead created a commission of sixteen to study the matter (eleven whites and five blacks), to bring a report to the 1929

Fall Council. Humphrey quickly concluded that although he was on the commission, black conferences were dead. He proceeded to pour his energies into promoting and soliciting funds for Utopia Park, forty-five miles south of New York City, in New Jersey. The park would include three lakes and facilities for an orphanage, a home for the aged, a training school, an industrial area, and private residences. It was time, Humphrey was convinced, for black Adventists to create their own institutions. When the conference president inquired into Utopia Park, Humphrey wrote back: "I thank you very much for your expressions of kindly interest and your desire to cooperate in this good work, but it is absolutely a problem for the colored work."¹⁰

During the year, the commissioner of public welfare for New York City had asked the Greater New York Conference what the Utopia Park promotion was all about, and the city made permission for soliciting in behalf of the project more difficult. In the fall of 1929, after consulting with the Atlantic Union, the Greater New York Conference requested that Humphrey give up plans for what the conference president had called a "colored colony." When Humphrey refused, the conference committee fired him.

The dismissal took place on a Friday. The following Saturday evening, the First Church of Harlem gathered to hear the news. Not only did the Greater New York Conference president attend, but also the president of the Atlantic Union, the secretary of the General Conference, and the revered president of the General Conference himself, W. A. Spicer. The meeting lasted five hours. According to an internal report of the General Conference leadership, the entire congregation supported the pastor. The *New York News* reported to the public that "the meeting soon became uncontrollable and bid fair to develop into a riot, which was prevented by the quick action of the pastor himself."¹¹

After the 1929 Autumn Council, in the midst of confrontations with Humphrey, J. L. McElhenny, vice president of the General Conference for North America, wrote a twenty-eight-page printed "Statement Regarding the Present Status of Elder J. K. Humphrey." McElhenny defended not only the denomination's actions concerning Humphrey, but also its refusal to approve separate Negro conferences. In less than twenty

years, McElhenny would again face a crisis in race relations within the Church and propose Humphrey's solution of black conferences.

However, on January 24, 1930, the Harlem First Church and its pastor were expelled from the denomination. Most of the members stayed with Humphrey, calling their congregation the United Sabbath Day Adventist Church. The district attorney's office cleared the Utopia Park project, but it was never developed.

Creation of Black Conferences

The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the beginning of World War II had a dramatic effect on American blacks, and indirectly on race relations within the Adventist Church. From 1933 to 1946, the number of black employees on the federal payroll increased from 50,000 to 200,000. Some black leaders called Roosevelt's

"RESPONDING TO SHIFTS IN OUR CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT HELPS US RECOVER AND APPRECIATE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF OUR COMMUNITY THAT WE HAD FORGOTTEN WERE POWERFUL AND REVITALIZING." —ROY BRANSON

presidential order of June 25, 1941, the most important document affecting them since the Emancipation Proclamation: "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin." For the first time, during World War II, blacks were integrated into units of the army, navy, and marines.

By contrast, at the end of World War II, at General Conference headquarters in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, the only black among General Conference leaders was the leader of the Negro Department. He and other visiting black leaders of the Church were still not permitted inside the Review and Herald Publishing House cafeteria, where General Conference leaders routinely ate lunch. Neither Columbia Union College nor Washington Sanitarium and Hospital, both nearby Adventist institutions, admitted blacks.

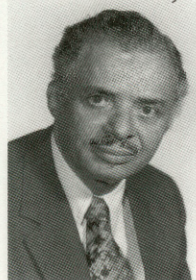
In this environment, the almost predictable incident catalyzing a change in relations between black and white Adventists occurred. A black Adventist woman

visiting relatives in Washington, D.C., suddenly fell ill. Her sister drove her to the closest Adventist hospital, the Washington Sanitarium and Hospital. The emergency room staff refused to care for a black patient. The desperate sister drove her to the Freedman's Hospital in another part of the city. But before they arrived, her visiting sister died.

The black press reported the incident to the country. Outraged black Adventists organized a Committee for the Advancement of Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists. Among the prominent black laity signing an eight-page set of demands from the committee to the General Conference was Eva B. Dykes, the first black woman to complete a doctorate in the United States—from Radcliffe College at Harvard University.

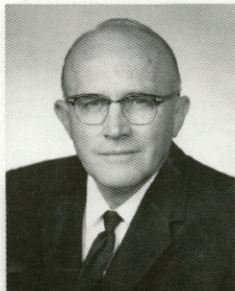
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Warren S. Banfield



Robert Carter

Robert H. Pierson



Charles E. Bradford

The statement contrasted the integration of colleges and hospitals outside the Church to denominational institutions to which black members contributed tithes and offerings. Three principal demands were made: integration of Adventist institutions, greater black representation at all levels of denominational administration, and greater accountability from denominational leadership of black members' financial contributions to the Adventist Church.

With the press following developments and prominent black laity across the United States demanding action, the General Conference president met with representatives of the committee. He then convened a meeting to consider the future of the black work in America. Just before the 1944 Spring Council of the Church's top leadership, prominent black pastors, leaders of union Negro Departments (appointed after the Church's previous racial crisis), prominent black laity, some white union presidents, and General Confer-

ence leaders gathered in April at a hotel in Chicago. Presiding was J. L. McElhenny, president of the world Adventist Church. Fourteen years before, as vice president for North America, he had been involved in dealing with the demands of J. K. Humphrey, the black conferences, and his subsequent expulsion.

The General Conference leaders informed the assembled group that integration of the Adventist Church on the scale outlined by the committee of black laity was impossible. Instead, McElhenny proposed implementing the 1929 demand of J. K. Humphrey and others to create black conferences. Each black conference would have jurisdiction over black members, who were then within several white conferences. In many cases, black conferences would coincide with the territory of entire unions. Integration was unattainable, but there

could be increased self-determination of black clergy and conference committees. What was being proposed fell between two alternatives in Protestant American churches: the commitment to integration at all levels, found among what remain predominantly white Episcopalian and Presbyterian denominations; and the completely separate black and white denominations, evident among

Baptists and Methodists.

The head of the General Conference Colored Department, G. E. Peters, supported the creation of black conferences. By the time a vote was taken, so did a strong majority of the entire committee. The 1944 Spring Council, which met immediately afterward, approved black conferences, voted to elevate Oakwood to senior college status, and appointed Louis H. Reynolds to be the first black editor of *Message*, the black missionary magazine.

Before the end of 1944, the Lake Region Conference was already established within the Lake Union. By the end of 1946, five black conferences had been created. Within a year of the organization of these black conferences, the percentage of the U.S. black population that was Adventist exceeded, for the first time, the percentage of U.S. whites who were Adventists.

Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, integration advanced gradually in the United States, and even more slowly within the Church. In 1950, McElhenny's

successor as president of the world Church, W. H. Branson, tried to speed things up. He released an unprecedented letter—reminiscent of a U.S. president's executive order—addressed to all union and local conference presidents and managers of Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America. In this letter he appealed to church leaders to redouble efforts in the area of human relations.

Perhaps no religious group in the United States or the world, claims so loudly that it is international in its attitudes and services as do the Seventh-day Adventists and yet, in this matter of Negro segregation, we are trailing behind the procession. We seem afraid to venture any changes in the relationships which we maintained a half century ago, notwithstanding the fact that the whole world about us has made and is still making drastic changes.

Shall we be the last of the Christian bodies to break away from our historic attitudes and chart a new course in our human relationships? . . .

We wish to appeal to the managing boards of our publishing houses, sanitariums and schools in the East, North and West, to give immediate study to this matter. We believe that in most places in these sections of the country there can be complete integration of the races in our institutions without serious difficulty.

We understand that in the Deep South a few of our institutional boards have voted to discontinue segregation. . . . In some places, it will require some courage to launch into such a program but the entire country is headed in that direction. The government, the churches, and the business world are leading the way, and why should we hesitate to follow?¹²

One month later, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously declared in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Through the remainder of the 1950s, administrators responded to Branson's letter and trends in the society by gradually integrating more and more Adventist institutions. It was later in the 1960s that Adventist schools were integrated and the General Conference session in San Francisco (1962) elected the first blacks to the positions of associate secretary

and general vice president of the General Conference.

Of course, Martin Luther King Jr. stepped up the pace of integration, with the 1956 Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, followed by other direct actions. In Tampa, Florida, a young pastor of the black Adventist Church, Warren Banfield, accepted the presidency of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He organized the black citizens of Tampa so well that his threat to lead a bus boycott was sufficient to integrate the public transportation of the city. He persuaded the city to build public housing for the poor black people of Tampa.¹³

Not surprisingly, a specific incident soon recrystallized race relations within North American Adventism. Almost twenty years after an Adventist black woman was turned away from the emergency room of the Washington Sanitarium and Hospital, Frank Hale, chairman of the department of English at Central State College at Wilberforce, Ohio, and Burrell Scott, a successful Ohio contractor, tried, at the beginning of the 1961-62 school year, to enroll their black daughters at Mount Vernon Academy in Ohio. They were refused, and no denominational officials rectified the situation.

As in 1944, the black Adventist laity organized, this time as the Laymen's Leadership Conference. In 1961, the General Conference president refused even to meet with the black laity. It was a mistake. Mylus Martin, a black member and reporter with the *Cleveland Press*, helped to facilitate news coverage. The first Saturday of the 1962 General Conference session, both San Francisco daily newspapers ran front-page stories, printing the demands of the Laymen's Leadership Conference: rethinking Adventist appropriations for black churches in the United States, abolition of unofficial but real racial quotas proscribing blacks in Adventist schools, and the complete and immediate desegregation of all Adventist organizations and institutions. More stories appeared in the local newspapers and in the national press on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. On Wednesday, the General Conference president held a press conference affirming that the Church would desegregate.

The Church had taken a major step toward responding affirmatively to demands it had said, sixteen years earlier, in 1944, were impossible to achieve—election of blacks to all levels of denominational administration.

During this decade, black Adventist leaders were being influenced by more than what they saw in the media. Black Adventist pastors in the South helped organize boycotts of merchants who segregated their

facilities. They participated in the famous march in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery that led to the passage of federal legislation guaranteeing voting rights for blacks. The South Central Conference, the black Adventist conference in the Deep South, made sure that its mobile medical unit from Mississippi was a part of Martin Luther King's March on Washington and that it was parked in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial to provide emergency medical care.

The Black Union Issue

At the 1968 annual meeting of North American black Adventist leaders, the Regional Advisory Council, several younger leaders proposed that the General Conference give greater financial support to black conferences and create two black unions in North America. They ran into the determined opposition of the General Conference president, Robert Pierson, who for years had worked with black leaders to expand the racial integration of the Church. In 1969, a special interracial commission to study the issue rejected black unions in North America but accepted the "Sixteen Points" that listed a series of measures that would strengthen the black work. The next year, Charles C. Bradford became the first black secretary of the North American Division. Black leaders were elected secretaries, or the second highest administrators, of unions across North America. In 1979, Charles Bradford succeeded Neal Wilson as the first black president of the North American Division. The next year, the Lake Union elected Robert Carter the first black president of a North American Union. In the 1990s, black leaders were elected presidents of predominately white conferences.

Growth patterns of black Adventists in North America reveal that membership took off after 1944, when black leaders took over the running of black conferences. There was another upturn in the mid-1960s, a period when black laity and clergy increasingly asserted themselves inside and outside the denomination. Even as black Adventists have become increasingly upwardly mobile—educationally, economically, and professionally—they have continued to grow in numbers. By 1992, black members constituted more than twice the percentage of U.S. Adventists (25 percent) as the percentage of black citizens throughout the nation.

Brown and Yellow, Black and White

A glance at the roots of ethnic diversity in North American Adventism suggests that currents in society and culture can lead us to rediscover important parts of our Adventist heritage. Responding to shifts in our cultural environment helps us recover and appreciate important aspects of our community that we had forgotten were powerful and revitalizing.

Also, growth and vitality more often flow from cultivating diversity than from seeking unity. The more self-determination Adventist ethnic leaders in North America have achieved, the more they have cultivated their communities, and the more the Church as a whole has grown.

Finally, we can only embrace the strangeness of others when we respect that which is surprising as an expression of God's irresistible creativity; when we participate in God's unquenchable delight in shapes, colors, and points of view; when we capture God's joy in the diversity of creation.

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