The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists had founded Oakwood Industrial School in 1896 as a place of higher education for the increasing number of African American converts to Adventism, then mainly concentrated in the southern region of the United States. The church chose the city of Huntsville, Alabama, as the site for the school because of its proximity to Nashville and Graysville, Tennessee, important Adventist centers in the South. Huntsville was also comparatively tolerant in racial matters in the turbulent Jim Crow era, and the low cost of land was an attractive option for Adventist leadership in the North.

The site for the industrial school itself, however, was not so promising. First suggested by veteran Black minister Charles Kinney, the 360-acre plot had been a slave plantation called the Beasley Estate, whose owner was reported to have brutally abused his Black captives. To make matters worse, the Alabama landscape was sloping and uneven. The red clay was hard as granite from being overworked, and dense brush covered the property.

Although pressed for money—and loath to funnel funds into a questionable enterprise in Alabama—the top three church administrators nevertheless surveyed the plot and decided to make the investment. Known unofficially as the “Huntsville School Farm,” or just “Huntsville,” the school was officially called “Oakwood” for the 65 oak trees that stood on the property.

Oakwood Industrial School was slow out of the gate after its doors opened on November 16, 1896, with a charter to train Black students to serve humanity through their respective areas of expertise and to spread the good news of Adventism to the world. Challenges with funding, staff, and students—not uncommon during the beginnings of any college—almost extinguished the fledgling school. But through the persistent efforts
of Ellen G. White after her return from Australia in 1900, and solid leadership at the school from staff and students, Oakwood survived and even prospered.

In 1909 Oakwood graduated its first class, and the next few years witnessed the establishment of a sanitarium and orphanage, as well as the construction of numerous buildings. The first ministerial student finished his course in 1912, and in 1917 the school officially became Oakwood Junior College. In 1931 Oakwood students engaged in a peaceful revolt, demanding that the church address racial inequities, update the curriculum, improve student living conditions, and hire more Black staff, including a president, a position heretofore occupied by White men. Each of their demands was eventually met, including the installment of a Black president, James L. Moran, the next year. Four years before Charles Brooks matriculated to Oakwood as a freshman, the church renamed the school Oakwood College.

Change in the Church
The years leading up to Charles’s enrollment in Oakwood were unprecedented in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination as well. In 1947 the world was still recovering from the devastation of World War II, with various nations jockeying for position in the new balances of power. In the United States African Americans increasingly demanded equal rights as citizens, thereby laying the foundation for the civil rights movement. Race relations were also troubled in the Adventist Church, but the civil rights movement of Adventism, as it were, would result in a kind of resolution before the peak of its counterpart in 1963 with the March on Washington.

As early as 1889 the first ordained Black Adventist minister, Charles Kinney, proposed separate Black conferences, because of the persistent race-based discrimination African Americans experienced in the church. Kinney had crisscrossed the United States, trying to interest Blacks in the Adventist message in any way he could. He met with modest success in the Midwest. In St. Louis he baptized a number of African Americans and brought them to the only Seventh-day Adventist congregation in the city, one predominately White. The new converts experienced such mistreatment from the White members that Kinney, in despair, made his suggestion for separate conferences. Besides being discriminated against on the local congregational level, Kinney also foresaw that because of White
prejudice Blacks would continue to be underevangelized and underrepresented in church ministry and leadership. When Ellen White visited the St. Louis congregation a year later, the racism there so saddened and shocked her that God gave her a vision to correct the situation.

The start of the twentieth century promised more of the same upheavals characterizing the 1800s until a satisfying solution to the unequal status and ill-treatment of African Americans could be found, both in the nation and the Adventist Church. Lewis Sheafe, the most influential and successful Black minister in the denomination in the early 1900s, was outspoken in his calls for racially integrated congregations. While his highly effective evangelistic methods in Washington, D.C., resulted in several new interracial churches, church administrators viewed them as problematic. Ideological clashes led to a declaration of independence by one of Sheafe’s Washington, D.C., churches in 1907, and that same year for all intents and purposes Sheafe himself left the denomination. Still, plans began to develop for ways to address the persistent and stubborn question of the “color line.” The Negro Department was church leadership’s answer. In order to meet the needs of a growing Black constituency as well as facilitate mission among African Americans, the General Conference established it in 1909. Incidentally, it was the same year that volume 9 of Ellen G. White’s Testimonies appeared with its controversial section “Among the Colored People.”

The Negro Department was ultimately unable to fulfill its purpose, especially as Black membership increased and racial dynamics grew more complex. Charismatic Black minister James Humphrey brought the unresolved issues to the fore. Like Sheafe, Humphrey was among the denomination’s most successful evangelists, baptizing hundreds in New York City in the 1910s and 1920s and establishing several churches. In the late 1920s Humphrey devised the Utopia Park Benevolent Association, a retreat facility where Blacks could learn the Adventist message and adopt more healthful lifestyle practices. His ideas clashed with church leadership, however, and ultimately the denomination disfellowshipped Humphrey and his congregation.

The final straw, as it were, was the Lucy Byard incident. Byard was a light-skinned Adventist senior citizen from New York City who in 1943 sought treatment for severe pneumonia at the Washington Adventist Sanitarium in Takoma Park, Maryland. Initially admitted by the White staff, the hospital discharged her when it discovered that she was African American. Her husband and friends rushed her to the Freedmen’s Hospital (now
Howard University Hospital) across town, but Byard died a few days later.

The reaction from Black Adventists was one of unbelief, outrage, and then action. A group of mostly laypeople formed “The Committee for the Advancement of World-Wide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists,” in April 1944, distributing a document titled “Shall the Four Freedoms Function Among Seventh-day Adventists?” It outlined the discrimination and outright racism against Blacks practiced in the church and made specific recommendations for redressing them in the educational, medical, administrative, supervisory, occupational, and spiritual realms of the denomination.

This grassroots movement and other similar constituencies did much to spur Adventist leadership to address racial inequity in the church. Among other things, the 1944 Spring Council of the General Conference, after extended discussion, voted to establish regional, or Black, conferences. In 1945 the church inaugurated three conferences: Allegheny (divided into Allegheny East and Allegheny West in 1967), Lake Region, and Northeastern. The next year it organized South Atlantic (divided into South Atlantic and Southeastern in 1981) and South Central, and in 1947 introduced Central States and Southwest Region.

Charles Brooks was converted and called to the ministry the year that the final regional conferences were organized. Addison Pinkney, cochairman of “The Committee for the Advancement of World-Wide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists,” conducted the baptisms in Brooks’s first campaign in Chester, Pennsylvania. Frank Peterson, an influential voice in favor of Black conferences at the 1944 Spring Meeting, was Charles’s college president at Oakwood, and one with whom he would have a close relationship. John Wagner, Brooks’s father-in-law, was the first president of Allegheny Conference. Finally the minister with whom Charles would first intern, J. G. Dasent, was the initial president of Lake Region Conference. Providentially, Charles Brooks accepted his call to the ministry at just the time when new administrative structures could enable and facilitate him in leading thousands to Christ. Ultimately, he would be one of the main individuals responsible for the success of regional conferences.

Getting There
Charles Brooks and his five friends from Greensboro started out on the train to Huntsville, electrified about the future, knowing that God’s plans for them were bound to brim with adventure and fulfillment. At a stop in