"EIGHTY YEARS OF ADVENTISM"
Narrative by ELDER H. D. SINGLETON

About the year 1915 the Adventists built their church across the street from our home. My parents became friendly with and curious about these Saturday worshipers. So Bible studies followed, and acceptance of the faith came in due time.

G. E. Peters

In 1917 G.E. Peters and then the Union evangelist came to our town—Jacksonville, Florida—with a tent and baptized about sixty people, greatly enlarging the congregation. Then Union evangelist, Elder Peters, expanded the work in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 1922 he baptized about 242 people in Tampa, Florida. That was a record for those times. That same year he was called to Chicago, where he built the Shiloh Church and congregation. In later years, he built up the work in New York City before becoming director of the Colored Department at the General Conference. He served in that department first from 1929 to 1930 and then from 1941 until his retirement in 1953.

Pioneers

In Florida in 1915, M.C. Strachan and J.S. Green were ministers. Later Floyd Stevens pastored Jacksonville. Checking the yearbooks from 1908-1917 I found these names and ministers: W.H. Green, Sydney Scott, Page Shephard, John Manns, W.S. Willis, R.L. Bradford, W.D. Forde, Thomas Branch, S.M. Campbell, J.G. Dasent, C.G. Manns, W.H. Maynor, Thomas Murphy, M.G. Nunez, J.H. Laurence, H.N. Gemon, W.E. Strothers, T.B. Buckner, G.P. Rodgers, F.G. Warnick, N.B. King, L. Sheafe, William Winston. From this list I'll pick out a few about whom I can mention something special.

*W.H. Green became our first General Conference representative when in 1918 he became the first black to be head of the Negro Department. He worked out of his office, which was in his home in Detroit. He was known to have a railroad pass with which he traveled free of charge everywhere over the country. He used it well and wisely. He died in his sleep in 1928 and was succeeded for a short period by G.E. Peters during his first term with the General Conference.

*Sydney Scott was a successful evangelist who baptized over 100 in Wilmington, North Carolina, around 1913. He held successful meetings in Columbia, South Carolina, and New Bern, North Carolina as well as many other cities. He is remembered especially for his novel use of the old charts of the beasts of Daniel and Revelation in his advertising during tent efforts.

*John Manns was successful as an evangelist, baptizing nearly 150 in Savannah, Georgia. He apostatized taking the church property and a sizeable portion of the membership with him. He then organized the Free SDA group and spread out as far as the West Indies, succeeding in starting several groups. He used extensively certain statements about race relations found in Volume 9 of the *Testimonies*. He died, it appears, under peculiar circumstances . As a child I heard the rumor that one of his ministers by the name of Mosely caused his death so he could take over the organization. Remember that was just a rumor I heard as a child.

*W.S. Willis was sent to Savannah, Georgia, to pastor the ones who had not apostatized with Manns. Willis was transferred in 1916 to Washington, D.C. to stabilize the remains from the Sheafe apostasy. That was the beginning of the Dupont Park congregation.

*R.L. Bradford, Sr., and R.L. Bradford, Jr., were the grandfather and father of our well-known Charles Bradford, former president of North American Division.

*Thomas Branch was our first Black missionary to Africa

*J. Gershom Dasent became the first Black president of Lake Region Conference.

*J.K. Humphrey pastored many years in New York City and had a congregation of about 600 when he apostatized, establishing the Sabbath day Adventist organization. His story is well-known.

*C.G. Manns was the younger brother of John Manns, who followed him out of our organization. He was a powerful preacher and was responsible for bringing the well-known Fordham family into the church.

*J.H. Laurence was a great soul winner and well-beloved pastor. He served long and well in several locations. In a tent meeting in Pensacola, Florida, his preaching persuaded Frank L. Peterson, then a teenager, to become an Adventist. O.B. Edwards was also from Pensacola. I never knew what influence Elder Laurence had on him.

*B.W. Abney, father-in-law to E. E. Cleveland, was a very successful evangelist and raised up several church in the Carolinas. He was a missionary to Africa.

*Lewis Sheafe was recognized as one of the top men in the church, regardless of race. He was a gifted preacher who was called to speak at General Conference meetings. He worked largely in the Washington, D.C., area. He had a problem with the church over race policies. In 1907 he took his congregation, the People's Church, out, then brought them back in 1913. He took them out again around 1915 or 1916. The remnant that remained were organized into the Ephesus (now Dupont Park) Church. He later connected with the SDA Baptists, as did his friend Dr. J.H. Kellogg of Battle Creek.

Further Reflections

A lot of things can be shared about the Black work, but this is history and needed telling. I guess I and I alone am left to tell the story about men who were pioneers.

Well, I entered the ministry in 1929 as pastor of the Chattanooga Tennessee Church. At that time the Negro membership was about 8,000. Now I'll list some additional ministers who had entered the work by the 1930s. (This is not complete because I am going from memory only, no yearbook.)

F.S. Keitts, J.G. Thomas, Owen Troy, Sr., H.D. Green, J.M. Rowe, J.E. Cox, Sr., Elder Phipps, Sr., J.H. Wagner, L.H. Bland, F.L. Bland, H.W. Kibble, C.E. Moseley, A.B. Storey, H.J. Miller, A.E. Webb, A.W. Clark, M.M. Young, and many others. The list is too long but their stories are known by many now alive.

In those days a master's degree from Andrews University was not needed to enter the ministry. Many were hired because of natural ability; of course a few years at Oakwood were very helpful.

Regional Conferences

In the 1940s separate conferences were started. These conferences had been asked for by the Black brethren about 1930, but we were told at the General Conference session held in 1930 that administrators plus the Great Depression weakened our hope.

However, a new philosophy among Black Americans began rising. Integration was the hope. Black Methodists were rebelling against their black central jurisdiction with its Black bishop. The U.S. armed services were integrated. So our Black Adventist hopes began turning in that direction. Among our leaders with this hope was Owen Troy, Sr. He was, at that time, our Black leader in the Pacific Union. We hoped to see some Black ladies as secretaries in the conference offices, more nurses in training in our hospitals, more patients there also.

As a move to ease those pressures, the General Conference was ready to make a move toward Black conferences. So these conferences were organized in 1945-1947. However, the Pacific Union had remained under the existing conference structure because that had been the wish of our Black personnel— That is, the majority of them. Our membership was about 17,000 when conferences were organized.

We had grown to over 50,000 by the time I became director of the Regional Department at the General Conference in 1962, and our numbers doubled to over 100,000 by the time I retired in 1975. I don't have the figures, but I am sure we are now [well over 200,000] Black members here in North America.

Having Regional Conferences has not interfered with integration since the nation has passed civil rights laws and the denomination has accepted them. Our non-Regional Conferences and churches are quite integrated.

Here I close my story. This is a part of history that I think should be told. There are not many left who have been a part of the Adventist world for 80 years.

Note: *The above narrative was shared in preparation for a special video series produced in 1995 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Regional Conferences. Elder Singleton has recorded further reflections about the Black work in an extensive interview with Delbert W. Baker (1995).*