

Death by Wasting Away: The Life, Last Days, and Legacy of Lucy Byard

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Abstract

Lucille Spence Byard is one of the most pivotal figures in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her rejection for medical treatment due to her race at an Adventist sanitarium on the Maryland-Washington, D.C., border in 1943 was the major catalyst for the formation of regional conferences, or Black-administered governance units, within the North American administrative structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, almost since the day Lucy Byard was refused treatment, the major details of the event have been subject to the whim of the teller, and variant versions have become embedded in church lore. What has been particularly problematic, though, is that historians have not made the effort to explore what actually happened to Byard, which would require bypassing the entrenched legends and consulting primary sources. This article reconstructs the Byard event from primary sources, allowing the participants in the event, especially those of color, to be heard. What finally emerges is Lucy Byard the person—much more than just an icon of tragedy—whose last days sparked the most effective grassroots movement in Adventist history.

Keywords

Lucy Byard, Seventh-day Adventists, African American religion, American Christianity, Regional Conferences, black healthcare, racism, segregation, Howard University Hospital

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Introduction

Lucille Spence Byard is one of the most pivotal figures in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her rejection for medical treatment due to her race at an Adventist sanitarium on the Maryland-Washington, D.C., border in 1943 was the major catalyst for the formation of regional conferences, or Black-administered governance units, within the North American administrative structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the proceeding decades, regional conferences transformed the Adventist Church both in the United States—its country of origin—and around the globe. Indeed, Byard's rejection may be credited as marking an end and beginning for the still-fledgling denomination: the end of a White, Western-dominated leadership and membership, and the beginning of what may be termed the browning of Adventism. Today, approximately 9 million of the 22 million Adventists worldwide reside in Sub-Saharan Africa, while approximately 35% of Adventists in North America are Black (Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, 2020).

Almost since the day Lucy Byard was refused treatment at the Adventist hospital, the major details of the event have been subject to the whim of the teller, and variant versions have become embedded in church lore. What has been particularly problematic, though, is that historians have not made the effort to explore what actually happened to Byard, which would require bypassing the entrenched legends and consulting primary sources. This article reconstructs the Byard event from primary sources, allowing the participants in the event, especially those of color, to speak.

However, it begins with a sketch of Lucy Byard herself, a heretofore almost unknown woman whose consignment to tragic catalyst has ironically taken away some of her humanity. I then examine the reaction by Black Adventists of the day to the Byard event and show how their mobilization resulted in a structural change in the church's governing structure and its far-reaching impact. Finally, I survey Byard's legacy in the Adventist Church today and problematize often-simplistic notions of racial progress.

Lucy Byard: A Life Sketch

Lucille Spence was born to Harriett and Jesse Spence on September 22, 1877, in Petersburg, Virginia. Lucy's parents were born into slavery in southern Virginia in the 1850s, to be emancipated with the millions of other African Americans during and at the close of the Civil War. The Spences had eight children in all: five daughters, including Lucy, and three sons.¹ Harriett Spence had the considerable job of raising the children, while Jesse Spence made a living as a fireman for a railroad company (U. S. Census Bureau, 1880).

As is the case with many Blacks in the South during the Jim Crow era, not much is known about Lucy's childhood. She grew up in Petersburg and completed her second year of high school, but she apparently did not receive any further formal education. Just less than half a year before the new century on August 10, 1899, Lucy was married to Charles W. Lewis by a Reverend F. J. Walker in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Also born in Virginia, but 4 years after Lucy, Lewis was a railway porter living in Allegheny. The newlyweds relocated to New York City shortly after their nuptials (Pennsylvania County Register, 1899).

It was in the bustling metropolis that Lucy discovered the Seventh-day Adventist Church, becoming a member at the age of 25 in 1902. In that year, out of approximately 48,000 Adventists in the United States, the Black membership is estimated to be around 500, with most residing in the South. As African Americans began the Great Migration to northern cities in the following decades, the Black Adventist demographic would correspondingly shift. In Harlem, James K. Humphrey (1877-1952), a Jamaican immigrant who converted to Adventism in New York City while on a layover to Africa a year before Lucy's conversion, was an early proponent of Black autonomy in the Adventist Church, even proposing Black-operated conferences, an arrangement which grassroots protest in response to Lucy's rejection would help bring about. In January 1830 Humphrey and his Harlem congregation left the Adventist Church behind Humphrey's contention that White Adventist leaders were apathetic and uninterested in the growth and prosperity of Black Adventism (Jones, 2006).

Upon her baptism, Lucy became one of the few Black Adventists in the big city, a person with three strikes against her: race, gender, and religion. This third component of identity merits more attention in intersectionality studies, especially when the religion is one like Adventism, which featured tenets that manifested themselves prominently but were counter to the prevalent culture, such as observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath by going to church on Saturday. The question has often been posed as to why Blacks who were already targets of discrimination would willingly accept another burden on their lives—a religion that was relatively new; was often considered strange; that didn't have many Black adherents; that had a raft of prohibitions around adornment, diet, entertainment; and whose White leaders were not particularly progressive on areas of race.

In fact, Blacks embraced the Seventh-day Adventist faith for numerous reasons, which often overlapped, as evidenced by their conversion testimonials. One was a belief that the Adventists taught the "truth" according to the Bible, especially in the areas of their moniker: the observance of Saturday as a holy day and the imminent *Parousia* of Christ. There were also those who

joined because of “friendship evangelism,” that is, enterprising Adventists who befriended and assisted potential converts with food, shelter, or some other necessity, and at an opportune moment shared their faith. Others were simply born into a family of Adventists.

Then there were Blacks such as civil rights activist Lewis C. Sheafe (1859-1938)—a man who spent a considerable part of his life casting about for programs, organizations, and ideologies that would benefit Blacks—who discerned in Adventism principles that could “uplift” his people (Morgan, 2010). These principles included an emphasis on literacy and education, a Protestant work ethic, and a lifestyle of temperance and vegetarianism. The aforementioned James Humphrey believed with his colleague Sheafe that Adventism could elevate Blacks, and before his departure from the church he had in the works the creation of a health resort in the country that would teach Blacks the church’s lifestyle mores.

Perhaps validating Sheafe and Humphrey’s notions of potential uplift, by the time of Lucy’s conversion to Adventism in 1902, there were a number of Black Adventists who had, or soon would, distinguish themselves in various pursuits and become American firsts: William J. Hardy (1823-1888) was elected supervisor of Gaines Township in 1872, becoming the first Black elected to office in the state of Michigan; Mary Britton (1855-1925) was Kentucky’s first woman licensed medical doctor and a civil rights activist of such a stature that Paul Laurence Dunbar immortalized her in a poem; James Chiles (1860-1930) argued the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad case for desegregation before the Supreme Court in 1910; Anna Knight (1874-1972) was the first Black woman of any denomination to serve as a missionary in India, which she did from 1901-1906; Lottie Blake (1876-1976) was for many years the sole Black female physician in the city of Birmingham, Alabama; Ruth Temple (1892-1984) opened the first health clinic in the medically underserved community of southeast Los Angeles, becoming the first African American woman to practice medicine in the city; Franklin H. Bryant (1877-1909) was the first Black law graduate at the University of Colorado in 1907; and Rosetta Douglass-Sprague (1839-1906), daughter of Frederick Douglass, was an assistant to her father and a distinguished civil rights activist in her own right.

Unfortunately, Lucy Byard’s reason for accepting the Adventist faith is unknown. Whatever it was, though, she was one of the unsung laypeople (non-clergy) who laid the foundation for Gotham Adventism. In truth, religious evangelism in America’s largest city was rough going, as *fin de siècle* missiologists considered New York City to be one of the most challenging areas for religious labor. Almost nothing is known of Byard’s proselytizing efforts because she was not an ordained male and thus was not featured in the

church's periodicals. However, there are two statements on Byard the lay worker from contemporary witnesses, albeit with some bias. Friend Greta Martin (1943) described Byard as "an earnest, sincere believer and a faithful worker in the cause of the Lord" who "was loved by all who knew her" (p. 6). Byard's granddaughter Naomi R. Allen (1987) remembered her as "a strong, energetic church worker . . . one of five Black women who pioneered the [Adventist Church] work in New York City. All her life she worked untiringly to build up the church" (p. 5).

Apparently unable to have children, Byard supplemented her lay church work with teaching piano, while her husband Charles was a chauffeur for a wealthy family. In 1910, the couple rented a house on 98th Street Harlem; in 1920, they were renting a house on West 141st Street. Tragically, Charles Lewis died shortly after turning 40 years on January 26, 1922, leaving Lucy a widow (U. S. Census Bureau, 1910, 1920).

Five and a half years later, Lucy found love again. James Henry Byard, a 58-year-old twice-widower with five children, was also from Virginia and made a living as a cellar worker in Queens. Both were avid musicians, Lucy playing the piano and organ, and James, the harmonica. The couple was married on September 23, 1928, at the First Harlem Seventh-day Adventist Church by James Humphrey. In a harsh irony, Humphrey presided over the wedding of a woman whose death would bring about the precise change in the church for which he departed from it. James and Lucy's marriage was described by granddaughter Allen (1987), who was largely raised by the Byards, as "a loving relationship" (pp. 4-5).

Lucy was a vital part of church life, playing the organ, teaching piano lessons, and directing the choir at the First Jamaica Seventh-day Adventist Church in Jamaica, Long Island. She was also renowned as a cook and for her gracious hospitality, entertaining thousands of guests throughout the decades in her homes in Queens and Long Island. "She had a special gift for hospitality," Allen (1987) recalls, "Her home and her heart were open to everyone" (p. 5).

The Final Days and Death of Lucy Byard

In the summer of 1943, Lucy, by then in her mid-sixties, developed liver cancer with a chronic case of cachexia, or the wasting syndrome. According to her husband James, she "needed careful watch and attendance" during that fateful summer. When it was clear that she required professional medical attention, Lucy and James carefully considered to which hospital she should be taken. James states that he "was suddenly deeply impressed to send her to Washington [Adventist] Sanitarium, of which place, I was not referred to by

anyone" (Byard, 1943, p. 1). James asked Jeter E. Cox, the Black pastor of the Bethel Seventh-day Adventist Church in nearby Brooklyn, to write a letter of introduction for him to the Washington Sanitarium, arranging for Lucy to be admitted there. Cox was ideal for this favor, not only because he was a respected minister but also because he had pastored in several states in the Columbia Union, the Adventist administrative area where the Washington Sanitarium was located.

Established in 1907, the Washington Sanitarium was a 188-bed medical facility located just outside of the nation's capital in the leafy suburb of Takoma Park, Maryland. Although by the early 1940s the Sanitarium was moving more toward the hospital model instead of the traditional lifestyle and retreat setup pioneered by John Harvey Kellogg at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, it still adopted a more holistic approach to health and wellness, with a central social component. As part of a holistic treatment, Sanitarium patients socialized inside the Sanitarium in the colder months, and in the seasons when the weather was pleasant, mingled outdoors on the sanitarium grounds. The General Conference (GC), the administrative headquarters of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church, was located on the border of the Maryland-Washington, D.C., line, just minutes away from the Washington Sanitarium. The Sanitarium was administered by a 10-member board of directors that included the GC treasurer, W. E. Nelson, as chair, and among its members, GC president J. L. McElhany. The Sanitarium's medical director was Robert A. Hare, a New Zealander from a prominent Adventist family, who had earned a medical doctorate from the College of Medical Evangelists (now Loma Linda University) in 1925 and had been medical director at Washington Sanitarium since 1938.

The practice of the Washington Sanitarium in admitting and treating Black people is complicated. Prior to 1943, Blacks had been treated at the Sanitarium, but on a limited, selective, and subpar basis: only a certain kind of Black person would be admitted, only in emergency cases, and could only be treated "in an inconspicuous way" in the basement of the Sanitarium by off-duty hospital staff (Washington Sanitarium, 1935). By 1943, the policy had changed: no Blacks at all were to be admitted to the Washington Sanitarium (1943). This exclusion policy would later be denounced by Black Adventists as especially egregious seeing that their considerable tithes helped fund the Sanitarium's operations. It is important to note that when Jeter Cox agreed to inquire the Sanitarium on behalf of Lucy Byard that he did not know about the reversal on admitting blacks; when he had worked as director of the Negro Department for the Columbia Union some years earlier, Blacks could still be admitted to the Sanitarium, albeit on a limited basis.

Jeter Cox wrote a letter to the Washington Sanitarium dated September 5, 1943, requesting a reservation be made on behalf of James and Lucy Byard and inquiring about financial assistance for the hospital fees. His letter was answered on September 9 by one Miss Brooke from the Sanitarium's credit office with an enclosed form for "part-pay, part-charity care." Cox responded to Brooke that the Bethel Church would cover Lucy Byard's medical expenses, paying US\$60 up front for the first week, with subsequent hospital bills sent to the church. Brooke replied on September 17 that the arrangement was acceptable and that the Sanitarium would be ready to admit Lucy Byard on Tuesday, September 21. After Cox had made the requisite arrangements with Washington Sanitarium and received confirmation of the reservation, the Byards prepared to travel to Washington. Cox was set to drive them, but because of the gasoline shortage brought on by World War II, the couple opted instead for the train.

James and Lucy Byard arrived at the train station in Washington, D.C., at 7:05 a.m., Wednesday, September 22, 1943. James Byard describes what transpired next six days later in a letter to G. E. Peters, secretary (director) of the North American Colored Department. Established in 1909, the Colored Department was located in the GC headquarters, a single full-time worker-staffed office that directed the Adventist efforts for Blacks in the United States. Its secretary George Edward Peters (1883-1965), an Antiguan who had immigrated to the United States as a young adult, had successfully walked the tightrope of being trusted by the White leadership and Black ministers and laypeople and had risen to the highest position in the Adventist Church available to a Black minister at the time. James Byard (1943) wrote to Peters as follows:

We, after much effort, arrived in Washington by rail and went directly to the [Washington Adventist] Sanitarium. I went to the office and informed them that I was Mr. James Byard, of Jamaica, Long Island, and that Elder Cox had made reservations for my sick wife. The attendant acknowledged my reservation, went out and spoke to my wife and proceeded upstairs. He returned shortly and called me into the office, and told me that he regretted to say this, but it was against the law of the State of Maryland to admit colored people into the Sanitarium.

I, of course, was stunned, for my wife had been looking forward with much anticipation to going to this particular Sanitarium, because she felt that she would be among her own people. There would be an understanding among them that she could not expect in an outside hospital. In fact her hopes were so high that her health was much better than it had been for days, and she even suffered the tiresome and painful train ride because of the expected destination.

I warned the attendant of my wife's condition, and reminded him that she needed immediate attention; also that I was not acquainted with any hospital in Washington, D.C., hoping that he might examine her and find out her critical state, but to no avail. I was utterly confused and tried to get in touch with you, but was unsuccessful. The attendant recommended me to Freedman's Hospital, and assured me that she would be accepted there. He called a taxi, told the driver the hospital to take us to, and my wife and I were driven away. (p. 1)

James Byard (1943) stated in closing:

My wife is now in Freedman's Hospital under competent and watchful care. I have now [sic; no] remorse[s] [sic], but I thought I might bring to your attention the sudden and unpredictable manner in which she got there. I would greatly appreciate it if you would, at your convenience, find time to visit her. (p. 1)

Medical director Robert Hare had a different take on what happened, even though he never had any personal contact with the Byards. In a letter to the GC president and secretary on November 15, a full 54 days after the episode and about 2 weeks after the death of Lucy Byard, Hare (1943) was in crisis mode, trying to diffuse an explosive situation that had gotten out of his control:

On September 21, a telegram was received at 11:00 P.M., stating that Mrs. Byard would arrive on the 7:05 train Wednesday morning—Elder Cox asking that she be met. As we do not have special means of meeting patients they took a taxicab and arrived at the Sanitarium between 9:00 and 10:00. Mr. [P.L.] Baker called me immediately and told me of the fact that Mrs. Byard was a colored person. In view of the fact that we had carried on our correspondence, not knowing that she was colored, I advised that we receive her into the institution giving her a private room and arrange for her meals to be sent on trays, and plan for her examination and diagnosis by our physicians in off hours, hoping that Mrs. Byard would see the fairness of this in view of our misunderstanding and the social sentiment that exists in Maryland. As an alternative Mr. Baker and I suggested the idea that she might go to Freedman's Hospital in Washington and have the diagnostic work done which she desired. I did not come to the office to meet Mrs. Byard at the time, feeling that in all probability she would elect to take the private room. When I finished my rounds I came back to my office and inquired what she had decided to do. I learned then that she and her husband had refused to accept our offer of a private room and had gone to Freedman's Hospital. (p. 1)

Hare's recounting may seem innocuous enough, but in a letter to W. E. Nelson, GC treasurer and chair of the Washington Sanitarium Board, half a year later, Hare (1944) reveals his true sentiments:

I cannot feel that the Sanitarium should be called upon to carry a mixed clientele. We have persons of high degree and low degree of the white race and no question exists with regard to their presence here, but were colored patients seen in our buildings there will immediately rise numerous complicating questions and certain groups of our patients such as those coming from Virginia and the Carolinas would be expected to take a degree of offense at their presence. I would just as willingly minister to the needs of a colored patient as anyone else, but mentally, emotionally, and in certain physiological respects they differ from the white, and I do not favor mixing them. (p. 1)

Hare (1944) continues sharing his thoughts on the possibility of admitting African Americans to the Sanitarium as follows:

Should we take a portion of the first floor of the hospital, that would bring in visiting negro groups and cars close to our nurses' dormitory. I do not see any just grounds on which we could say we would maintain a negro ward and limit admissions on a religious basis. This would be quite contrary to hospital practice so we would possibly open a contact with the negro population entering our grounds more or less regularly. And right now I feel that the Sligo creek and the woods along it are little enough barrier between us and the local negro settlements. (p. 1)

Nelson's (1944) reply to Hare's letter reveals similar prejudice:

You mention that patients from the Carolinas and Virginia [*sic*] would object, but I believe patients coming from the District of Columbia and Maryland and from every other State would object almost as strenuously. The Psychology of these black people is so different from the white that it would be impossible for us to mix them. Some have suggested that we have a wing in the hospital. That would be all right if we did not have a sanitarium in connection with it. It has been amusing to me to observe the colored brethren who have attended the bookmen's convention. There have been 20 or 30 present, and in years past they used to find seats together. But now they studiously scatter themselves in every part of the room, many times only one colored person in a place.

As I view the whole situation, Dr. Hare, it is not a matter of the colored people wanting a little sanitarium of their own where they can receive attention, but what they want is racial and social equality. (p. 1)

These baldly racist statements by the medical director and board chair, respectively, of the Washington Sanitarium, evince that the Byards grasped the true sentiments of the Sanitarium staff when they did not feel welcome. These upstanding and sincere Adventists who happened to be Black, were not welcome in an Adventist institution whose *raison d'être* it was to heal the sick.

As both James Byard and Robert Hare attest, after Lucy was rejected at Washington Sanitarium, the Byards took a taxi six miles across town to Freedman's Hospital, today's Howard University Hospital. Founded in 1862 during the Civil War, Freedman's Hospital was the first medical facility of its size and stature in the nation established specifically for the treatment of Black people. At the time that Lucy Byard was admitted to Freedman's, Charles Drew, the renowned medical researcher, was chief surgeon there. It is also commonly held that J. Mark Cox, a Black Adventist who was a physician-in-training, was interning at Freedman's at the time and gave special attention to Lucy. Recall that James Byard (1943) spoke well of Freedman's Hospital, assuring G. E. Peters that his wife was "under competent and watchful care" (p. 1).

However, Lucy's condition began to worsen. Although the effect the traumatic event at Washington Sanitarium had on Lucy's health is not known, it could not have been positive. If what James Byard (1943) averred when Cox gave word that Lucy would be admitted into the Sanitarium was true—that Lucy's "hopes were so high that her health was much better than it had been for days"—then her spirits would have sagged and her health worsened after she was turned away by "her own people" (p. 1).

Thirty-eight days after being denied equal treatment at the Sanitarium, Lucille Byard died at Freedman's Hospital on October 30, 1943. The immediate cause of death was cachexia, "wasting away," and her death due to carcinoma of the liver, or liver cancer (Government of the District of Columbia Department of Health Vital Records Division, 1943). Her body was transported to Brooklyn, New York, while her funeral was held in Harlem at the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church. Hundreds of distraught and upset mourners attended the service, with 13 ministers officiating, led by James Humphrey. Lucy Byard is buried at the Siloam section of Evergreen Cemetery in Brooklyn.

Aftermath

No sooner had Lucy and James Byard been turned away from the Washington Sanitarium than word of the incident spread among the approximately 16,000 Black Adventists around the United States. Their emotions ranged from disbelief to frustration to sadness to rage, all the more poignant because of the betrayal of the Christian principles of love and oneness that purportedly united Adventists of all colors. For Black Adventists of the time, the rejection of the innocent Lucy Byard was a representation of all that was hypocritical and hideous about the church's racism beneath the chimera of Christianity.

The half-year from mid-October 1943 to mid-April 1944 witnessed Black Adventists mobilize as never before, a coming of age, as it were, of these marginalized members. Byard's rejection became rhetorical shorthand for Blacks' universal rejection by White Adventists, a rallying point for the major sectors of Black Adventism. They sprang into action and wielded heretofore untested power and influence for racial justice in their church. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the complex developments of the historic half year, but six dynamics that emerged from the Byard protest movement that resulted in Black Adventist autonomy will be adumbrated here.

First though, a word should be said about the state and structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States in 1943-1944. By the 1940s, the church had established a governance structure that has been said to only rival the Roman Catholic Church among Protestant denominations in terms of levels of bureaucracy and hierarchy. In 1943, the year of the Byard incident, the North American Division (NAD), the Adventist governance structure in the United States and Canada and 1 of 13 world divisions of the GC headquarters in Washington, D.C., had an Adventist membership of approximately 200,000, with an administrative hierarchy of 11 unions (all with a fully staffed headquarters), comprising 53 state/local conferences (also with a fully staffed headquarters). The unions and conferences were the owners and operators of Adventist schools, hospitals, and other concerns (Conard, 1945). In this vast administrative apparatus, there were only a couple handfuls of Blacks in employ. Indeed, the bureaucratic behemoth that was the Adventist Church in America was organized and maintained by and for White men from 1860 to that present day, racially innocuous at first because of the few Black members of the church. However, throughout the eras of chattel slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, White supremacy became engrained in Adventist Church structure and policy. It was against this formidable foe that the 16,000 Black Adventists of North America were arrayed in the struggle to overturn racist policy.

Dynamic 1: Byard as Primary Catalyst

The Byard event was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back vis-à-vis Blacks and the racist status quo in the Adventist Church. Prior to October 1944, Blacks had dealt with prejudice in the church in various ways: ignoring it, avoiding it, indirectly addressing it, directly addressing it, lobbying for separate Black-administered conferences, and, in some cases, leaving the church. However, these strategies seem to have gotten Blacks no further than the racism displayed in the Byard episode. But the outrage and protest over Byard was so great that less than seven months later, church administrators

had officially voted to do what had not been done before, even though there had been previous movements to do so: to fundamentally alter the leadership structure of the NAD by creating Black-led conferences that overlapped the territory of the existing conferences (Rock, 2018).

Not only had there been previous pushes to establish separate Black-led administrative units before the Byard episode, but there were movements well after too. In the 1970s, Black Adventist clergy lobbied to establish Black unions (recall that unions oversee conferences), only abandoning the call when the first Black president of the NAD was elected in 1979.² In the 1990s, there was a movement among Black Adventists in California to organize a regional conference in the West. It also came to naught. The Byard event remains the sole catalyst of Black-led units in the church.

Dynamic 2: Mobilization of Laity

The Byard incident mobilized into action every sector of Black Adventism, but especially the laity—non-clergy beyond the reach of White church administrator’s punitive reach and censure. Two weeks after the Byard incident, roughly a dozen laypeople formed the Committee for the Advancement of Worldwide Work among Colored Seventh-day Adventists (the Committee), the most effectual grassroots movement in the history of the church, on a Saturday night in the backroom of a Washington, D.C., bookstore near Howard University. The Committee comprised influential and educated laypeople such as Eva B. Dykes, the first Black woman to complete the requirements for a PhD and a professor at Howard University at the time; and Valarie Omega Justiss (later Vance), in 1950 the second Black Adventist to earn a PhD, who vigorously and forcefully compelled both White and Black Adventist clergy-administrators to make real and lasting changes to rectify the church’s egregious discriminatory practices. The Committee’s eight-page April 1944 manifesto “Shall the Four Freedoms Function Among Seventh-day Adventists?” (“Freedoms”) systematically outlines the Jim Crow conditions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Blacks generally not being admitted to Adventist schools and hospitals, Blacks not being employed at Adventist institutions, Blacks lacking representation among church leadership, tithes and offerings given by Blacks being diverted to White Adventist concerns, church policies ignoring Black members and institutions, and racial segregation marking worship services in Adventist churches (The Committee for the Advancement of World-Wide Work among Colored Seventh-day Adventists, 1944). “Freedoms” was in the possession of each delegate who voted to approve Black-run conferences on April 10, 1944—placed in their hands by Committee members at the meeting in an unofficial capacity (Morgan, 2016).

“Freedoms” directly locates Black Adventists in the great sweep of the burgeoning civil rights movement among African Americans and diasporan Blacks in the World War II years. The Garveyite Movement, Harlem Renaissance, and other movements instilled racial pride in Blacks that inspired them to demand their American birthright of complete citizenship. The Second Great Migration of African Americans from the South boosted the numbers of Blacks in the metropolises of the North and East, and Blacks increasingly began lobbying for equal rights in the major areas of American life: employment and salary, government assistance, education, housing, sports, and the arts. Blacks were among the tens of thousands American troops deployed to Europe, and upon fighting for their country’s and White Europeans’ liberty, they returned home insisting on freedom for themselves, their families, and their race. Blacks became more vocal in formal organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, as well as informally in race riots, most notably those occurring in 1943 (Kruse & Tuck, 2012). Black Adventists joined their voices in the chorus of these rumblings by titling and structuring their demand to Adventist leaders after President Franklin Roosevelt’s human rights guarantees in his 1941 State of the Union Address.

Other lay groups in Adventism joined in the Byard protest movements. Several Black Adventist congregations contacted the GC president to denounce the treatment of Byard. Byard’s home church, First Jamaica SDA, in fact, wrote McElhany a letter signed by 16 members (including James Byard) five days before Byard’s death threatening to sue the church for damages if it did not promptly pay Byard’s traveling expenses to Washington. McElhany and the Washington Sanitarium promptly complied (Members of First Jamaica S. D. A. Church, 1943). Other black Adventist congregations turned into hotbeds of righteous foment, chief among them being Ephesus and First (Washington, D.C.), Ephesus (Harlem), Ebenezer (Philadelphia), Ethnan Temple (Pittsburgh), Shiloh (Chicago), and Riverside (Nashville). In addition, there were groups such as the Ohio Lay Membership Units and the Association for the Advancement of Advent Youth that did their part in their respective spheres to achieve Black equality in Adventism.

Equally vital were the efforts of laypersons acting independently. One example was Stark O. Cherry, an African American physician from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he served as an elder at Ethnan Temple. On March 8, 1944, Cherry drove from Pittsburgh to Washington to meet with GC president McElhany at his office, and in a precise manner laid before him the racial sins of the church and the steps needed for atonement. Deeply impressed, McElhany requested that Cherry send him a follow-up letter with the points they discussed. The next day Cherry (1944) sent the requested

letter, three and a half pages, to McElhany, who in turn promptly forwarded it to each union president, a move that could only have encouraged a yes-vote for Black conferences a month later. Upon Cherry's recommendation in the letter that a Black lay delegate be sent from each union, 7 of the 11 unions in North America sent a Black delegate to the Spring meeting in Chicago the next month, with Cherry appointed as the delegate for the Columbia Union.

Dynamic 3: Women as Leading Activists

Despite the church being cofounded, and in many ways led, by Ellen G. White from the 1850s until her death in 1915, women in the Adventist Church in the 1940s could not be ordained as pastors and thus could not serve in leadership positions in the church, and thus had virtually no voice in the operations of the minister-dominated leadership. It is therefore remarkable that in this church dominated by White men that their exact demographic opposites, Black women, arguably achieved the most as Byard protestors. The aforementioned Eva B. Dykes and Valarie Justiss were crucial members of the Committee for the Advancement of the Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists. Justiss, the corresponding secretary of the Committee, wrote the probing correspondence that roused church leaders out of their lethargy, and was tireless in her networking and organizing. Another vital member of the Committee was its vice-president, Alma J. Scott, an outspoken activist for civil rights and Black empowerment in the nation's capital. Willie Anna Dodson and her husband James (president of the Committee) were the leading couple of the Committee, its founding in their bookstore that Saturday night in October 1943. Equally remarkable were women such as J. Estelle Barnett of Columbus, Ohio, a voice for Black uplift and justice both in the Adventist Church and in the state of Ohio, who was the force behind the organization of Allegheny East and Allegheny West, which would become two of the most important conferences, regional or otherwise, in North America. Although none of these women placed a vote at the 1944 Spring Meeting that approved regional conferences, their yeoman efforts made the conferences a reality.

Dynamic 4: Black Clergy Deliver

Black Adventist clergy—all men during the 1940s—most frequently encountered systemic church racism because they had the most contact with church leaders and institutions. Indeed, the closer one was to the church

administration and its policies, the greater his knowledge of its prejudiced underbelly. It was the lot of Black clergy to be the go-betweens of White church administrators and Black parishioners: a lot that was at times barely tenable. In the 20th century, a frequent leitmotif in the correspondence of Black Adventist Church leaders is not divulging what they had seen and heard on the administrative level to their local parishioners lest the latter's faith be put in jeopardy and they defect from the church. There was also the painful realization that the White administration's racial stances hindered potential Black converts from joining the church.

After his wife was turned away, it was appropriate that James Byard write to the minister G. E. Peters, director of the Colored Department and therefore de facto leader of "the black work." It was Peters who apprized the most elite church administrative committee, the GC officers' meeting—he was the sole Black on the committee—on October 3, 1943, of the Byard's situation and the fraught state of affairs in Black Adventism because of it, and Peters who had the leading role in architecting and seeing through the Black conference plan at the 1944 Spring meeting. But there was a wealth of other Black ministers who were on the forefront with Peters, men who made the dubious notion, to many White leaders, of Black-led organizational units a success, and thus created the modern Adventist Church in North America. The Black clergy delivered.

Dynamic 5: Integration not Separation

It must be underscored that even after word of the Byard's rejection had spread, most Black Adventists *still* did not want separation from White Adventists. Indeed, as African Americans have often done throughout American history, Black Adventists displayed an exceptional forbearance with Whites and their racism, seeking for integration instead of separation. When there was segregation, it was because the Whites demanded distance from Blacks, not the other way around. The scores of letters from Black Adventist thought-leaders of the time, written both to each other and White leaders, almost all prescribed racial inclusiveness, based on the Black writers' notions of the Christian gospel. The Black-administered conferences were eventually voted and organized because of a refusal by White Adventists to integrate with Blacks. In the words of Black minister, A. Wellington Clarke, at the Spring Council discussions just before the affirmative vote for Black conferences, "Is there a necessity for a change [for black-administered conferences] or are you brethren [white Adventist leaders] forcing this upon us?" (General Conference Committee, 1944, p. 2).

Dynamic 6: Quintessentially Protestantist

The essence of Protestantism, indeed the very root of the moniker itself, is protest. Seventh-day Adventists have always considered themselves to be “heirs of the reformation,” the final movement of protestation and separation from Roman Catholicism. Much is made in the writings of Ellen G. White (1888), as well as the other founders of the Adventist Church, of Martin Luther and his 95 theses and principled protest of not only doctrinal error but also inequity in the Catholic Church. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was incorporated on May 21, 1863—one of a handful of American-born religious denominations—as, among other things, a protest and rejection of mainline Protestant churches. To protest is quintessentially Adventist.

Martin Luther’s namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr., protested against America by appealing to quintessential Americanisms—the constitution and other founding documents, the words of the founding fathers, its laws—to show that the nation’s racist treatment of Blacks was against the very principles that founded and formed the nation and made it what it was. Unlike Luther, King could not be expelled from the United States, although he was slain for his efforts.

So it was with the 1943–1944 Byard protest movement. Like Luther and King, the Black Adventist protestors were protesting precisely because they were loyal Adventists and were voicing to their oppressors that their oppression was as wrong as it was not Adventist, inconsistent with the church’s founding principles and founding mother, Ellen G. White. Blacks did not vacate the church; they remained to make it better, to push it to live up to its ideals. Like Luther and King, Black Adventists wanted integration, not separation.

The Byard protest movement resulted in the organization of Black-led and Black-comprised conferences, organizational units within the NAD “where the colored constituency is considered by the union conference committee to be sufficiently large, and where the financial income and territory warrant” (General Conference Spring Meeting Minutes, 1944, p. 1315). These would overlap with the existing conferences but with separate offices and personnel, focusing on the Black Adventist membership, churches, and institutions, as well as evangelizing the wider Black population within the territory. At the beginning of 1945, three regional conferences were established: Allegheny, Lake Region, and Northeastern; and in 1946 and 1947 four more followed: Central States, Northeastern, South Atlantic, and Southwest Region. The meteoric growth of black Adventist membership and institutions under the regional conference model silenced white critics’ disparagement of the idea of Black leadership and autonomy: 17,000 Black Adventists in 1944, 23,000

in 1950, 37,000 in 1960, 70,000 in 1970, 193,000 in 1990, and approximately 300,000 today (Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, 2020).

Black conferences inaugurated an epoch of the flourishing of Black Adventism. In 1945, the first Black editor of the denomination's Black outreach magazine, *Message*, was appointed. In 1946, *The North American Informant* (now *Regional Voice*), a periodical on the goings-on of the Black work among Adventists in the United States, appeared. Many Black schools and hospitals were either established or improved. Now in a position to exercise leadership, Black leaders came into their own and were appointed, often with prodding from Black protest groups, to positions over the global church at the GC headquarters and in the NAD: in 1962, the first Black GC vice president was elected; and 4 years after the second, in 1966, a Black person was appointed the director of a department of the GC; in 1979, the first Black president of the NAD was elected; in 1980, a Black was elected secretary (second-in-command) of the GC; also in 1980, a Black was elected president of a union in the United States; in 1990, a Black man was nominated president of the GC, although he declined the position. Regional conferences were also instrumental in the development of Black Adventist laypeople, who have made significant contributions in America and the world at large.

Byard Today

Concomitant with the rise of social media over the last two decades to its present dominance has been the call from many Seventh-day Adventists to abolish regional conferences and revert to the one-conference-per-territory model. The basis for this call is the argument that color must not separate Adventists anymore, and to stop living by the outdated, race-based arrangements of a past whose horrors are hard to conceive of in the present moment. The details of how exactly this would be done, what with the legal issues, employees, corporations, institutions and so on, have not been outlined in any feasible way. This talk has largely died down and been replaced by the movement to ordain women in the church, protests over police brutality against Blacks, and the politics of Donald Trump. However, separate conferences inevitably come up in any comment thread on the church and race, or what the church must do to be ready for the *Parousia*.

Despite the persistence of separate conferences, however, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has made some gestures recently to redress its racist past. On June 20, 2015, at a program commemorating the 70th anniversary of Lake Union (an Adventist organizational body directing the church in a large part of the Midwest), its president Don Livesay (White) apologized for the racial failures of the church that led to the creation of regional conferences,

specifically mentioning the death of Lucy Byard (Lake Region Conference, 2015). When Livesay retired about two years later, he was replaced as president by a Black man. Then, in February 2017, Black students at Andrews University, Adventism's first college and its flagship institution, produced "#ItIsTimeAU," a video protesting historic and contemporary racism at Andrews, and issuing a one-week ultimatum to the school administration to apologize for its systemic racism and implement several reforms for racial equality (Hayes, 2017). After five days, Andrea Luxton (White), president of Andrews, responded with a video of her own, stating, "I am sorry. As an organization we have been guilty of racial bias, of making our faculty, staff, and students of color feel 'less than' . . . For that, I apologize." Other Andrews administrators issued their own mea culpas on the video. The administration followed with a list of measures to implement in response to the Black students' demands, most notably, creating a new position, Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, and hiring a Black man to fill it (Andrews University, 2017). In 2018, there was a discussion with the officers of the NAD and Adventist college students in which the NAD secretary lamented the Byard incident when asked about race relations in the church (North American Division, 2018). Perhaps most germane to this article, the administrators of Washington Adventist Hospital, formerly Washington Sanitarium, have stated that Lucy Byard will be memorialized at their new hospital facility in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Despite these gestures, probably few in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America would admit that the church has atoned for the Byard rejection and come to grips with its racist past. This has been underscored by a kind of racist frankness that has manifested itself during the Trump presidency and is often cosigned by White Protestants. Indeed, there is an uneasiness that, as many Americans thought that the United States had transcended its racist past with the two-time election of Barack Obama as president, but were jarringly disabused of that notion, that so the Adventist Church has deluded itself with a conceit of unparalleled racial progress since Byard's death. Indeed, in its present challenges with race, the church continually grapples with Lucy Byard's life and tragic death. Hopefully, it will not let her wasting away be in vain.

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Notes

1. Byard will be referred to as “Lucy” in parts of this article to avoid confusion with surnames.
2. Today, there are four Black union presidents out of eight unions.

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