

HERITAGE

FIFTY YEARS AGO WORLD WAR II ended. The United Nations was formed. And a sea of change took place in the Adventist Church in North America. That year the church voted to organize regional conferences.

This year represents, therefore, a special time of celebration for Adventists in North

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on boards, councils, and committees.

Membership in Black conferences is now approaching a quarter million, tithes are more than \$90 million, and workers trained in regional conferences have made an inestimable contribution to the world church by serving at every level of the denomination, in North America and around the world.

Innovative programs and outreach plans of regional conferences annually add vitality and strength to the world church program (see sidebar "Looking to the Future"). Regional presidents and leaders have demonstrated administrative acumen that has matched, and in many cases surpassed, that considered to be the norm in the general church. Further, through regular councils, meetings, and boards, there have been ongoing network-

REGIONAL

by Delbert W. Baker

50

Years of Progress

CONFERENCES

America, heralding as it does the fiftieth anniversary of that historic development. It is historic—and pivotal—because it established a new area of governance in the Adventist Church. As intended, regional conferences have dramatically expanded the Adventist work among Black people in the United States. Membership in these conferences is open to all people, and the term *regional* merely describes the distinctive geographic territories they cover.

During the past 50 years these confer-

ences have positively changed the face of Adventism, making a notable contribution to every facet of the church's ministry, and engendering a new sense of identity, participation, and spiritual ownership among constituent members. As we reflect on how God has blessed the Black work in the United States through this means, His providence confronts us on every hand.

Formed to achieve greater soul-winning results among Black Adventists in a "shorter space of time than would be achieved under the previously existing organization," regional conferences have brought about the following results, among others, in the Black sectors of the church:¹

- Dramatic increases in evangelistic outreach.
- New opportunities for training and experience in ministry.
- Increased opportunities for leadership, service, and participation in church governance.
- Normal eligibility for elected offices, and ex officio representation

ing and support for all aspects of the world church program. Clearly, the hope of those leaders who supported the establishment of such conferences has become a reality.

This article is not written to recount the entire history of regional conferences. There are several histories that already do so.² Instead it will provide the story of why and how church leadership came to establish Black conferences.³

The Way Things Were

The decade of the 1940s was a turbulent one for the United States. Change and conflict were constants. The country was still recovering from the Great Depression. Morale was low. And, perhaps most traumatic, the nation was struggling in the aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the entrance of

the United States into World War II.

All this was compounded by unrelenting racial tension in the nation. The Roosevelt presidential order, issued in 1941, began to address the problem. "There shall be no discrimination," it said, "in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

Conditions in the Adventist Church, however, were not reflective of the government position. White Adventist congregations and administrative leadership positions were rarely accessible to Blacks prior to the 1940s. The first Black person to work at the General Conference was the director of the Negro Department. Neither he nor Black visitors to the General Conference were permitted to eat in the Review and Herald cafeteria (the eating place for the General Conference workers at the time). Segregation was the norm for the first half of the 1900s. Across the United States the denomination's schools and institutions did not yet have an equitable admissions policy.⁴

From the late 1800s, when Charles Kinney, the first Black minister to be ordained, was faced with segregation on the day of his ordination, the church struggled with what to do about race relations between Blacks and Whites.⁵ Educator and author A. W. Spalding recorded that in 1890, R. M. Kilgore, the first denominationally assigned director of the Adventist work in the South, "advocated the separation of white and colored churches" to the church leadership; and "in the end this view prevailed."⁶

As the situation between Whites and Blacks went from bad to worse, Ellen White was forced to confront the church about its unjust treatment of Black people in general and Black Adventists in particular.⁷ Following the turn of the century, though the overwhelming majority of Black Adventists remained faithful to Adventism, a number of prominent Black Adventist ministers and laypersons gave up their affiliation with the Adventist Church because of its treatment of Blacks.⁸ Conditions deteriorated as the confrontations between Whites and Blacks became more frequent, resulting in Black (and some White) Adventists speaking out against the discriminatory practices of the church through the printed

page, through demonstrations, and through lay organizations.

An event that has come to be known as the Byard incident personified the tragic conditions in the church and the frustration and disquieted mood of Black Adventist believers. Perhaps more than any other, this incident highlighted the need for a change in the church's attitude toward race relations and the need for a new way of administering the Black work.

Shortly before the 1944 Spring Council, in which the decision was made to establish regional conferences, Lucy Byard, a fair-skinned Black female who was a longtime member of the Brooklyn Seventh-day Adventist Church, was visiting relatives in the Washington, D.C., area. She became seriously ill and was taken to the nearby Washington Adventist Hospital, then a segregated facility. When the staff realized that Lucy Byard was a Negro, they refused to treat her and discharged her from the hospital. Before she could receive treatment at the Freedmen's Hospital across town, her condition worsened, and she died. The effect of this incident was profoundly disturbing to Black Adventists. Numerous solutions were proposed—including total integration. But none were accepted as feasible by denominational leadership.⁹

Grieving but resolute, Black ministers and laypersons pressed church leadership for immediate redress. Emotions were stirred. The mood was tense, resulting in an uneasy standoff. It was a dark and tenuous period in the history of Adventism. Resolution was badly needed.¹⁰

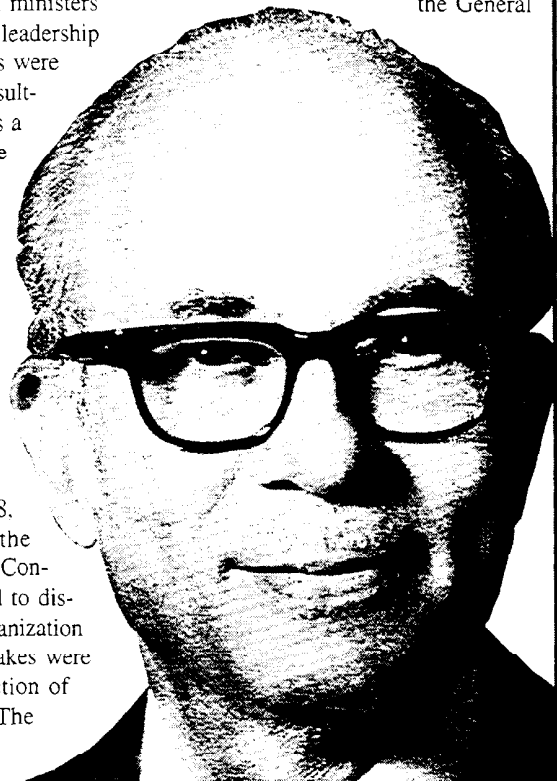
A Time for Action

In the wake of the racial tensions, an apprehensive and troubled group of workers convened at the Stevens Hotel in Chicago on Saturday evening, April 8, 1944. These premeetings of the Spring Council of the General Conference were specifically called to discuss the advisability of the organization of regional conferences. The stakes were high. The reputation and direction of the church were on the line. The

racial dilemma and the grievous misfortunes of the recent past challenged the very unity of the movement.

As the premeeting got under way, it was apparent that there were differences of opinion as to what was the proper solution to the racial impasse. Some advocated the status quo approach, which would essentially leave conditions as they were—hoping that the situation would evolve into a more acceptable state. Others wanted full and complete integration, regardless of the mind-set of the White Adventist membership. Then there was the group that believed that the regional conference arrangement would resolve the tensions without compromising the essential unity of the body. Still others advocated more radical solutions.

Ideological differences crossed racial and collegial lines. There was a diversity of opinion among Whites, among Blacks, and between Whites and Blacks. Then there were differences between administrators and pastors and laypersons. To further complicate matters, as the time for the crucial discussions arrived, James L. McElhany, president of the General Conference and the facilitator for the discussions, lay in his hotel room sick. When he did not appear as scheduled, George E. Peters, director of the Regional Office of the General



Conference, delayed the discussions until he could go and talk with the president.¹¹

Peters impressed McElhany with the need to speak to the issue one way or another. Clearly the dilemma would not be resolved unless and until the General Conference president articulated his position. Peters insisted that if the crisis wasn't addressed, he didn't know how he or McElhany "could ever face the colored constituency again."¹² The problems would not just go away.

Upon arriving at the meeting, McElhany started the discussion by recounting the evolution of the Black conference concept. He indicated that much thought and discussion had been given to the topic not only on an administrative but also on a pastoral and lay level among Whites and Blacks. He further spoke of his keen concern for Blacks as a people and how he had developed "a deep interest in their welfare."

Rejoicing over the progress of the Black work in the Adventist Church, McElhany spoke of his belief that now was the time to "lay wise and adequate plans" for the development of work among Blacks. "Self-interest ought to be laid aside," he commented, as he invited discussion. Concluding his remarks, McElhany added: "I have known conferences to be organized with only 800 members which have proved to be successful."¹³

During the ensuing discussion, White and Black leaders openly expressed their views. William A. Spicer, former missionary and editor, and a former president of the General Conference, spoke in favor of the organization of Black conferences. "In Europe," he said, "we have

German conferences, French conferences, Swedish and Polish conferences; why not Black conferences?"¹⁴

Jay J. Nethery, president of the Lake Union Conference and later a vice president of the General Conference, gave an inspirational presentation and expressed strong support for Black conferences. He highlighted his remarks with the thought that he had confidence in the Black leaders; that just as it had worked when they had formed conferences some years earlier, so it could work now. Most important, by having conferences they would "be able to save more souls in their territory."¹⁵ This statement was particularly meaningful in that it focused on the major objectives for forming Black conferences—the saving of souls and the building up of the work of God.

Of the several Black persons who spoke, Peters sought to direct attention to the big picture of the work in the future. He reminisced that Blacks had been patient and had not forced the issue of Black conferences, even though they had raised the issue some years earlier. But he was quick to add that as invited guests of the premeetings, they were ready to support the recommendation, to move beyond the "status quo," "avoid confusion," and accept "some organization [structure] that will give us a future."¹⁶

F. L. Peterson, another prominent Black minister, forcefully spoke in support of Black conferences. He felt it was "one of the most outstanding moves that [has] ever been made for us" and that it would "have a wholesome effect on all our people throughout North America." He indicated

further that Black conferences would inspire leadership by giving "the young people courage and something to look forward to in the denomination." This, he added, would be a means of helping to finish the work.¹⁷

As the discussion progressed there was a coalescing of views, and a consensus began to emerge. Of the 22 speakers on record, 17 spoke in favor of Black conferences, three spoke against it, and two asked questions of clarification. The overwhelming majority of leaders present, White and Black, voiced their support of Black conferences. Those who did not favor the idea ended by saying they would support "whatever organization is selected."¹⁸

Of all the speeches made, the most influential was that by the General Conference president on the second day of the meetings. Not only did McElhany support the wisdom of Black conferences, but he also went on to affirm the capabilities of Black leadership, expressing confidence in them as leaders. "To say a man could be a pastor of a thousand members, but couldn't direct a thousand members if they were divided into conferences seems to me to be inconsistent in reasoning," he said.

Sensitive to the diverse views concerning Black conferences, McElhany expressed his intent both to help Blacks take leadership responsibilities and preserve unity. "If I thought anybody was proposing a conference organization that would drive a wedge between the races I would oppose it. I do feel anxious for us to develop every resource. . . . We must keep together and maintain the spirit of counsel and helpfulness." He reminded the meeting that resistance to new ideas was something that had been experienced before, and that during the early days of the Adventist Church when the denomination "first organized churches [and conferences] people looked upon it as dangerous . . . [and] wrong."¹⁹

The Enabling Action

After the premeetings, the discussion, and the debate, the moment came. Walter W. Fordham, retired regional conference president and former director of the General Conference Office of Regional Affairs, attended the meeting and later

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summarized the event: "Finally the inevitable happened. . . . The discussion finally came to a head. Pros and cons were examined. There were heated discussions. And in the end there was a vote to establish Regional conferences."²⁰

After the recommendation was voted in the premeeting, the action was passed on to the Spring Council in session the next day. Though Blacks (as invited, nonvoting guests) did not participate in the vote on the pending recommendation, the records indicate that the "recommendations were submitted to the delegations at the April 1944 Spring Council and were unanimously adopted." Thus, it is recorded:

WHEREAS, The present development of the work among the colored people in North America has resulted, under the signal blessing of God, in the establishment of some 233 churches with some 17,000 members; and, **WHEREAS**, It appears that a different plan of organization for our colored membership would bring further great advance in soul-winning endeavors; therefore

WE RECOMMEND, That in unions where the colored constituency is considered by the union conference committee to be sufficiently large, and where the financial income and territory warrant, colored conferences be organized.²¹

Organizing Regional Conferences

Thus, regional conferences came to be. Following the enabling action of the General Conference, the unions quickly scheduled and convened constituency meetings across the country for the organization of regional conferences. In rapid succession regional conferences were formed:

■ Allegheny (1945—J. H. Wagner, president; in 1967 Allegheny Conference divided into the Allegheny East Conference—W. A. Thompson, president; and the Allegheny West Conference—W. M. Starks, president).

■ Central States (1947—T. M. Rowe, president).

■ Lake Region (1945—J. G. Dasent, president).

■ Northeastern (1945—L. H. Bland, president).

■ South Atlantic (1946—H. D. Singleton, president; in 1981 South Atlantic divided into South Atlantic Conference—R. B. Hairston, president; and Southeastern Conference—J. A. Edgcombe, president).

■ South Central (1946—H. R. Murphy, president).

■ Southwest Region (1947—W. W. Fordham, president).

To date, the nine regional conferences, located in six of the nine unions of the NAD, cover 39 of the 50 states.²² H. D. Singleton and W. W. Fordham, both retired, are the only two of the original presidents alive. At the time of the forming of regional conferences, the West Coast territory, which included the Pacific Union Conference and the North Pacific Union Conference, chose to administer the Black work through Regional Affairs offices.²³ Bermuda Mission, a Black-administered field, was officially organized as a conference in 1984.

The Black work has made quantum leaps since the establishment of Regional conferences. The membership increased from 17,000 in 1944 to 23,000 in 1950, to 37,000 in 1960, to 70,000 in 1970, to 193,000 in 1990, and to more than 220,000 in 1995. In 1944 Black Adventists constituted 9 percent of the membership in the U.S. By 1977 it was 20 percent; then 23 percent in 1985; and more than 25 percent in 1995. In 1944 the tithe from the Black constituency was \$511,000. It grew to \$18 million in 1977, \$40 million in 1984, \$69 million in 1990, and to more than \$90 million in 1995. Currently, tithe returns from regional conferences exceed the annual tithe returns of every world division, except the North American Division.²⁴

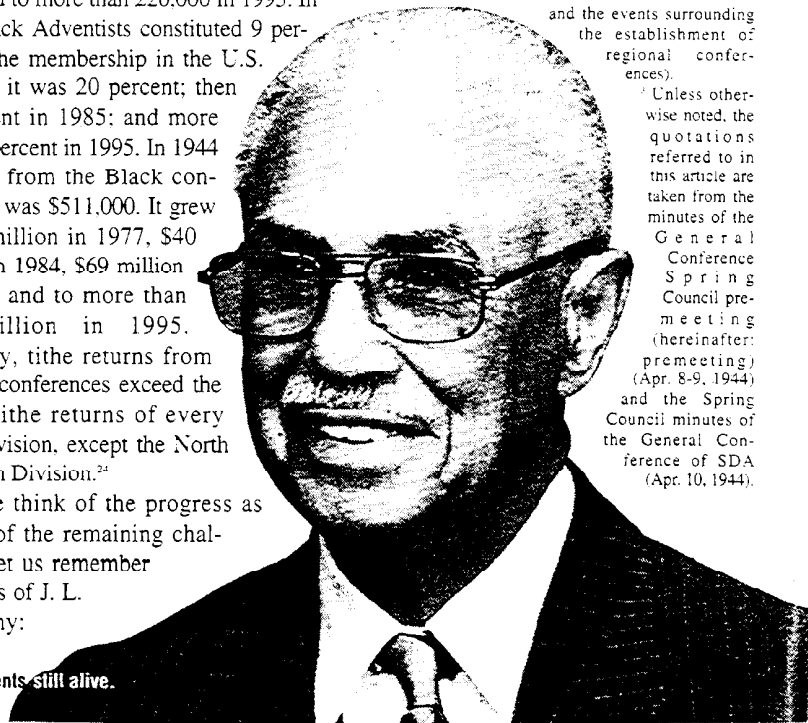
As we think of the progress as well as of the remaining challenges, let us remember the words of J. L. McElhany:

"The thing for us to do is to get this work finished just as soon as we can and go to our eternal home where these racial conditions do not exist. . . . It will be a glorious thing when we can go to our eternal home. We will forget all the things that have troubled us in this world."²⁵

²⁰ Today there are nine such conferences in the North American Division that have a largely African-American leadership and constituency. Most of them were organized between 1945 and 1947. (The terms *regional conference* and *Black conferences* are used interchangeably in this article.) Each regional conference is organized within the existing administrative structure of a union conference, and covers not merely one portion of the union area, but generally all the Black churches in the whole region of the union. The Pacific and North Pacific unions currently have no regional conferences, but instead have union and conference regional departments that serve in an advisory capacity for the Black constituency in their areas. In Canada there are churches that are predominantly White, churches that are predominately Black, and churches that are fully integrated—but no separate conferences. In Bermuda most of the churches have a majority of Black members and the current president is Black. (See *SDA Encyclopedia* [1976], p. 1191.)

²¹ See, for example, D. W. Baker, *The Unknown Prophet* (1987); *Make Us One* (1995). (The latter has a chapter by Roy Branson entitled "Adventism's Rainbow Coalition" that traces the roots of the different ethnic groups that make up the SDA Church and includes a section on Black Adventists; W. W. Fordham, *Righteous Rebel, an Autobiography* (1990); Ronald Graybill, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations* (1970) and *Mission to Black America* (1971); Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony* (1975); L. B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow* (1984); Calvin B. Rock, "They Without Us Shall Not Be Made Perfect," in *Go On: Vital Messages for Today's Christian* (1984); R. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (1979); Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work* (1966 reprint); *A Star Gives Light, Seventh-day Adventist Heritage* (a teacher's resource guide), produced by the Office of Education, Southern Union Conference (1989); *SDA Encyclopedia* (has a wealth of material on the Black work and the events surrounding the establishment of regional conferences).

²² Unless otherwise noted, the quotations referred to in this article are taken from the minutes of the General Conference Spring Council premeeting (hereinafter: premeeting) (Apr. 8-9, 1944) and the Spring Council minutes of the General Conference of SDA (Apr. 10, 1944).



14 (1374) W. W. Fordham, one of the two original Regional presidents still alive.

* Louis B. Reynolds, in *We Have Tomorrow*, discusses the conditions in the SDA Church and cites illustrative examples. See chapters 16-18.

* It was on this occasion in 1889 that Kinney first proposed the idea of the regional conference concept ("C. M. Kinney's Statement" [Nashville: Oct. 2, 1889]); James Edson White also intimated the merits of Blacks providing leadership for their own people in a letter to his mother, Ellen White, on June 28, 1900.

* A. W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (1962), vol. 2, p. 188; see also Spalding's unpublished manuscript "Lights and Shades in the Black Belt" (1924) p. 142; see also *Review and Herald* report by Kilgore (Oct. 29, 1889).

* See Delbert W. Baker's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "The Dynamics of Communication and African-American Progress in the Seventh-day Adventist Organization: A Historical Descriptive Analysis" (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1992), for an examination of Ellen G. White's role in the progress of Black Adventism.

* One of the most well-known cases is that of Pastor J. K. Humphrey. For more information, see Joe Mesar and Tom Dybdahl, "The Utopia Park Affair and the Rise of Northern Black Adventists," *Adventist Heritage*, January 1974.

* See the November (1943) General Conference Executive Committee minutes where it is noted that a committee was appointed to study "the future development of our colored work in North America" (Nov. 3, 1913).

* See Calvin B. Rock's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "Institutional Loyalty versus Racial Freedom: The Dilemma of Black Seventh-day Adventist Leadership" (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1984), for an examination of various protest methods to effect positive change in race relations in the Adventist Church. For information on the rationale of Black conferences, see also Frank W. Hale, Jr., "Commitment versus Capitulation," *Spectrum*, Spring 1970.

Reynolds, pp. 294, 295.

* *Ibid.*, p. 295; Fordham, p. 78; Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony*.

* Premeeting minutes—Apr. 8, 1944.

* Fordham, p. 79.

* *Ibid.*, premeeting minutes—Apr. 9, 1944.

* Premeeting minutes—Apr. 9, 1944.

* *Ibid.*

* Premeeting minutes—Apr. 8, 9, 1944.

* Premeeting minutes—Apr. 9, 1944; Reynolds, p. 295.

* Fordham, p. 76.

* General Conference Spring Council minutes, Apr. 10, 1944.

* See *SDA Encyclopedia*, pp. 1190-1196.

* Currently, there is a movement on the West Coast among Black laypersons and pastors to establish regional conferences. Most notable in this connection is WURK (Westerners United for Regional Conferences).

* See statistics from the NAD Office of Human Relations; Harold Lee's "A Comparison and Analysis of the Title of North American Regional Conferences With Other Segments of the World Church, 1992" (updated, 1995); Rock, *Go On!*, p. 103.

* Premeeting minutes—Apr. 8, 1944.



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Future

Regional conference presidents share their vision for ministry

My vision for ministry is:

"To integrate the wellness concept into all aspects of ministry in my conference—spiritual, social, physical, and mental. Thus we can equip our constituents to make a greater difference in their communities."

*Alvin M. Kibble, Allegheny East Conference
(original membership: 6,745; current: 24,396)*

"To facilitate a massive conference-wide sense of urgency on the part of pastors, administrators, and laypersons as we approach the year 2000—to unite together to spread the gospel and to prepare for the coming of Christ."

*Willie J. Lewis, Allegheny West Conference
(original membership: 4,624; current: 11,206)*

"To educate every member as to the soul-winning benefits of developing a Christlike character. A plan to help accomplish this goal is Project 100 for 1, by which every member is personally challenged to get involved in a specific ministry of the church."

*J. Alfred Johnson II, Central States Conference
(original membership: 798; current: 8,700)*

"To help people in the Black community—inside and outside of the church—to realize the tremendous potential of Adventism to address and provide solutions for the challenges facing them. In so doing, we help people prepare for the temporal as well as the eternal."

*Norman K. Miles, Lake Region Conference
(original membership: 2,500; current: 22,117.)*

"To use our resources as one of the largest conferences to assist other regional conferences in such projects as Ebony Evangelism, with the aim of spreading the three angels' messages to urban centers and training workers and educators to train others."

*Stennett H. Brooks, Northeastern Conference
(original membership: 2,208; current: 39,561)*

"Besides the charge to evangelize and keep the unity of the faith, there remains the challenge to do something to minister to the Black male—not only in regard to his future destiny but also for the sake of his self-esteem and self-worth in this present life."

*Ralph P. Peay, South Atlantic Conference
(original membership: 3,523; current: 25,122)*

"To constantly develop creative and innovative forms of ministry to finish the work of God, and to keep the history and vitality of the Black work alive so that it will be a means of inspiration and motivation for future generations."

*Joseph W. McCoy, South Central Conference
(original membership: 2,235; current: 24,804)*

"To focus on the mission of the church in our schools, our churches, and in everything we do. Evangelism should be the golden strand, clearly seen as our reason for existence and the purpose of our being."

*Roy R. Brown, Southeastern Conference
(original membership: 8,511; current: 21,420)*

"To so dynamically multiply members, churches, and resources by the year 2000 that we will have to divide the conference in order to adequately administer the work. We want explosive church growth to lead to explosive conference growth and expansion."

*Robert L. Lister, Southwest Region Conference
(original membership: 1,939; current: 15,821)*