

Christian, Lewis Harrison (1871–1949)

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Lewis Harrison Christian served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an evangelist and administrator for more than fifty years. Beginning as a reluctant and unsuccessful preacher, he had a powerful experience with God, which turned his ministry around. As a child of immigrant parents, he felt a special call to work for the foreign-born in America, which later led him to help form and develop the Adventist work in Europe. In his later years, he wrote several books addressing the challenges and issues of the time.¹

Early Years

Lewis Harrison Christian was born on a farm near Owatonna, Minnesota, U.S.A., October 20, 1871, the fourth child of Hans and Katrina Christian.² His parents, who had been Baptists, had come from Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1866. Soon after arriving in America, they came in contact with Adventists, accepted the three angels' messages,³ and were baptized by John G. Matteson.⁴ The childhood home was a happy place for the young boy, with much farm work, and always with morning and evening worships.⁵ Early in life he showed a deep religious interest, and after several months of soul searching, he found peace with God when in a dream had heard an angel say: "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin." On his twelfth birthday, he was baptized, together with his brother Andrew, by his uncle, Pastor C. Nelson.⁶



Lewis H. Christian.

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When he sensed that the education in the school in Owatonna was shaking his faith in the Bible, he chose to leave school and began canvassing at the age of 17. The Lord was with him from the beginning, selling our books for two years and in six summer holidays.⁷ Also, when he was 17, he participated as an observer at the Minneapolis General Conference meetings held between October 17 and November 4, 1888, when Ellen G. White, together with A. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones, presented a new emphasis on righteousness by faith. This contributed to the evangelistic tone in his future preaching.⁸

In 1890 he and his brother Andrew went to Union College in Nebraska. He spent six years at the college, graduating with the class of 1896--1897. It was at Union College that he got acquainted with one of the pioneers to the Scandinavian countries, John G. Matteson, whose influence had a great impression on his later work. He also met O. A. Johnson and E. W. Farnsworth, whose strengths were in the logical and powerful way they pointed out biblical doctrines, and finally professor C. C. Lewis, who stimulated his love for reading and writing. It was while at the college that he met Mable Royce, whom he married on June 14, 1899.⁹ "The very best gift of Union College," as he expressed it later in a Union College Alumnus citation. "It was she who taught me to smile my way over the roughest roads."¹⁰

The Challenge of the Lonely Winter

Upon finishing college, Christian felt called to preach, but he was very reluctant to do so as he was shy and had trouble expressing himself. "I had no pleasing voice," he later wrote. "Some months earlier as I preached on Sabbath at the college to a group of about one hundred, Elder J. G. Matteson, one of the Bible teachers, arose at the close of the meeting and remarked, 'I suppose it was a good sermon, but I could not hear a word of it.' I vowed then that I would never be a preacher, but Elder J. M. Erickson, another of my Bible teachers, told me to keep on and preach every chance I had."¹¹

Late in October 1897, Christian accepted an invitation by the conference president to participate in the yearly Ministers' meeting. He happened to stay in a room next to the room where the conference committee was meeting. The walls were so thin that he couldn't avoid hearing the discussion. And suddenly he heard his own name being mentioned and the discussion about him, which was not too favorable. After some silence, the president said, "I have a plan for him. We will send him up to the northern part of Minnesota and let him start in the city of Warren in Marshall County and work right on up the Canadian line. Now we will let him sink or swim to suit himself." Brother Christian prayed through the night and decided to accept the challenge and spend the winter alone in Minnesota.

Next morning he had packed his suitcase, and the same evening he took the train to Warren. Arriving next morning he didn't find any Adventists there but knew of an Adventist family 30 km further northeast. Being short of money, he walked the 30 km, in deep snow, with his belongings on his back. The out-of-the-way church was happy to see a pastor, but he didn't succeed too well with his meetings. The man in the home directed him

to another family, 110 km away on the other side of Thief Lake, where they had shown an interest in the Advent message. It took Christian a week to walk through the snow to the new place. On the way he found lodging for the night and meals during the day with the hospitable and hardy pioneers. He was well received by the interested family, and they accepted the truth. The man in the house arranged a meeting for him in a settlement 6 km from them. The inhabitants of the settlement were all socialists and non-believers, but since they couldn't work outside in the winter and had plenty of time, they agreed to listen to him. Quite a crowd turned up in the farmhouse at the designated time. After some initial conversation and a prayer, Christian started to preach, but after about twenty minutes he ran dry and could not think of anything more to say. He heard their slurring and scornful remarks. But one lady defended him, and they said he could come back.

He was ashamed of his failure and hurried away out into the woods, where he knelt in the snow and started praying. He felt God's presence all the hours he agonized in prayer, and when he finished, he stood up with new hope and the feeling of being a different person. God's power had come over him. From that moment on he would preach with conviction and had no problems finding the words to say. "My heart was so full that I announced meetings, not only once a day but many times two or three times a day."

During this winter he preached in many places, among Pentecostals, Methodists, Lutherans, and non-believers. A pastor from another denomination encouraged him to go to a place 13 km away, where no other pastor had succeeded in preaching the gospel. "It is considered the most godless place in Minnesota. When I have tried to visit them on Sundays, they will not even give me hay for my horses." Christian took up the challenge and stayed for several weeks there, and many were led to Christ and his truth. From October 1897 to the end of March 1898, he walked from place to place in northern Minnesota through the snow and ice. Many were converted. When the ordained ministers came up to baptize, they reported that there were about one hundred people that had accepted the Lord and the three angels' messages that winter. No longer were there any doubts in Christian's mind that he should enter the ministry.¹²

Evangelist and Church Leader

In 1899 he and his new wife, Mable, moved to Chicago, where he focused on conducting evangelistic work among the Danes and Norwegians. He was ordained to the gospel ministry in the summer of 1900.

As a preparation for a more far-reaching work among the Scandinavians in America, he received an invitation from the General Conference to travel to Copenhagen for two years. Here he held public meetings and helped train the young preachers and Bible workers from 1902 to 1904. While he was in Denmark, his wife, Mable, died, and he traveled back to Chicago with his little daughter.¹³

From the summer of 1904 he served briefly as president of the Northern Illinois Conference.¹⁴ In 1905 he was joined by Hansigne Panduro from Skodsborg in Denmark, whom he married,¹⁵ and she stood by his side and was a good support to him for many years.¹⁶ As soon as he could be relieved from his job in the Northern Illinois

Conference, he began conducting evangelistic meetings in Milwaukee and Minneapolis and was appointed as superintendent of the Danish-Norwegian Department of the North American Foreign Department of the General Conference, a position he held from 1905 to 1913.^{17 18} During this period he helped establish the Danish-Norwegian Seminary in Hutchinson, Minnesota.¹⁹ Minnesota was the preferred state for many Scandinavian farmers and therefore also had a good concentration of Adventists, who originated from these countries. In Christian's home the homeless and poor could always get help and meet understanding. Many can testify to his valuable counsel and his talent to help them solve their personal problems. In all his life he never lost sight of the individual, although he was busy with administrative duties.²⁰

In 1914 Christian was elected as president of the Lake Union Conference²¹ in the North American Division. In this union there was a great work to do for the foreigners, and he always found joy in working for the foreign people within the borders of America. God blessed his work, but he longed to work in closer contact with the people that spoke foreign languages.²² At the General Conference session in 1918, he was elected as secretary of the Foreign Language Department, called the Bureau of Home Missions in North America.^{23 24} At that time there were still millions of people that you could bring the gospel to with great results, if it was preached to them in their own tongue.

Europe

After World War I the General Conference was much occupied with stabilizing the work in Europe. In April 1920, Christian was elected as president of the European Division, and with his family, he sailed for Europe. From his home and the office in Bern, Switzerland, he traveled continuously, doing his best to build up the work that had suffered from the war.^{25 26} He helped with setting up institutions and advance the evangelistic work, as there had been awakened an interest for the message after the Great War. In a few years the membership rose from 40,000 to 80,000.²⁷

In 1928, at a meeting in Darmstadt, Germany, Europe was divided into four sections, and Christian was asked to be the president of the Northern European Division, with headquarters in London, Great Britain.²⁸ He held this responsibility until 1936, during which time he undertook several journeys to the near Orient, Egypt, and Palestine. He was in Africa six times and visited both the east coast and the west coast. Three times he was in Russia. One of these trips was in connection with the Red Cross together with Dr. Frithjof Nansen. The purpose was to help Adventist members that suffered during the famine. He made sure that 22 wagon loads of grain, which had been donated by Adventists in America, were sent into Russia.²⁹ Sadly in October 1936, Hansigne, his wife for 31 years, passed to her rest.³⁰

Return to America

After working for 16 years in Europe, Christian was elected one of three general vice-presidents of the General Conference at the 1936 session in San Francisco, California, a responsibility he carried for ten years.^{31 32} In 1938 he married Dorothy White who, with her kindness and understanding, was a great help to him in his last working years.³³

During his time as vice-president, he was in Inter- and South America and undertook a journey around the world. He was the last representative from the General Conference to visit members in Europe before the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

He visited Scandinavia in the autumn of 1946 and again in 1947. On this, his last journey, he also visited Germany and the Netherlands. His heart was with his brothers and sisters in Europe. He suffered with them in their struggles and difficulties. It was his great desire to stay for one year in Germany and Scandinavia, to travel from church to church and encourage the members, but it was not to be.³⁴

At the General Conference session in 1946, he was elected one of the general field secretaries of the General Conference.³⁵ From then on he devoted his time to writing and to teaching in the Adventist Theological Seminary. He wrote six books³⁶ and numerous articles. Just before his death, he was busy writing a series for the Review and Herald, and they were much on his mind during the three weeks of his illness. He died in Sacramento, California, on March 11, 1949.³⁷

Afterthoughts

Being a busy man and often away from home, he was blessed with a safe home base, where prayers on his behalf and loving care for his children gave him immense peace of mind.³⁸ He was loved and admired by his daughters. His second daughter, Asta Rasmussen, describes him this way: "He was a wonderful father—full of joy and fun with us children at home."³⁹ Christian will be especially remembered for his unpretentious ways and powerful preaching, his love for ordinary people and care for the foreigners among us. Toward the end of his life, he wrote these words. "For 52 years I have preached this truth and have traversed a large share of the world field. Not long ago I had another experience, somewhat of a sequel to the hours with God that marked the beginning of my ministry. I seemed to be standing before the people in the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco during a General Conference. I was ready to preach to them the triumphs of the third angel's message in countries beyond the sea. As I began to speak, not a word could I utter to the people. And I heard a voice with great distinction say, 'The Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.' Grief-stricken I awoke. It was only a dream. Shortly thereafter the doctor informed me that my health did not permit any further public appearances. Then I thanked the Lord for His kind reminder that the gift He had so graciously bestowed years before had enabled me to serve him for many years of fruitful work. To him be the glory!"⁴⁰

Iversen, Jensigne; Svendsen, M.C.; West, Carla, editors, *Skodsborgersamfundet*, 1936.

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NOTES

1. Among his books are: *Pioneers And Builders Of The Advent Cause In Europe*, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1937; *Facing the crisis in the light of Bible prophecy*, Review and Herald Publishing Association (RH), 1937; *Sons of the North*, RH, 1942; *Prophecies of Race and Religion*, RH, 1944; *The fruitage of spiritual gifts: The influence and guidance of Ellen G. White in the Advent movement*, RH, 1947; *The Aftermath of Fanaticism: Or, A Counterfeit Reformation*, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1957.
2. "Christian - Louis Harrison (Obituaries)," *ARH*, April 28, 1949, 20.
3. Asta Rasmussen (daughter of L.H. Christian) to Hans Jørgen Schantz (director of Historical Archives of Seventh-day Adventists, HASDA), September 17, 1996, private letter, HASDA, Denmark.
4. Unpublished paper kept in the files of L.H. Christian, HASDA.
5. Asta Rasmussen.
6. "Nekrolog over L.H. Christian" (Obituary of L.H. Christian), *Missionsefterretninger*, May 1949, 4.

7. Ibid.
8. Hans Jørgen Schantz, *I troens bakspejl* (In the Rear-View Mirror of Faith (Nærum, Denmark, Dansk Bogforlag, 1998, 56.
9. "Nekrolog," 4.
10. Pearl L. Rees, *Union College Alumnus*, Vol. XI, June 1947, 3.
11. Lois C.A. Randolph (daughter of L.H. Christian), *The Challenge of the Lonely Winter*, an excerpt from L.H. Christian's Autobiography, sent to Hans Jørgen Schantz at HASDA on September 17, 1996, 4.
12. Ibid., 1-8.
13. "Nekrolog," 4.
14. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1905, 37.
15. Hansigne Panduro was a nurse and had just been employed as a matron of Skodsborg Badesanatorium in 1904. So, the Sanatorium only reluctantly let her travel to the United States to marry Elder L. H. Christian, who stood alone with his motherless little girl, Lois, whose health was so poor, that the physicians didn't give her any hope. But Hansigne was able to nurse the child back to health. Later she gave birth to two girls, Asta and Myrtle (*Skodsborgersamfundet*, 1936, 29).
16. "Nekrolog," 4.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1906, 13, and the following years till 1914.
18. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Christian, Lewis Harrison."
19. Ibid.
20. "Nekrolog," 4.
21. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1915, 123.
22. "Nekrolog," 4.
23. "Christian – Louis Harrison (Obituaries)," *ARH*, April 28, 1949, 20.
24. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1919, 13.
25. Ibid., 1923, 83.

26. Obituaries, 20.
27. "Nekrolog," 5.
28. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1929, 127.
29. "Nekrolog," 5.
30. *Skodsborgersamfundet* 1936, 28.
31. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1937.
32. "Litt fra Generalkonferensen i San Francisco, Kalifornia," *Missionsefterretninger*, July 1936, 1.
33. "Nekrolog," 5.
34. Ibid.
35. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1947, 7.
36. *Pioneers and Builders of the Advent Cause in Europe*, Pacific Press Publishing Association (PPPA), 1937; *Facing the Crisis*, Review and Herald Publishing Association (RH), 1937; *Modern Religious Trends*, RH, 1941; *The Sons of the North*, PPPA, 1942; *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, RH, 1947; *Ved Vendepunktet* (At the Turning Point), Copenhagen, DB, (Published between the two world wars).
37. Obituaries, 20.
38. *Skodsborgersamfundet*, 29.
39. Asta Rasmussen.
40. Lois C. A. Randolph, *The Challenge of the Lonely Winter*, 8.

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