

Brooks, Charles

Decatur

(1930–2016)

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Charles Decatur Brooks (universally known as “C. D. Brooks”) was one of the most successful evangelists of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and as speaker-director of Breath of Life Ministries for twenty-three years was a trailblazer of religious media.

Early Life

Charles Decatur (C. D.) Brooks was born in Morehead Township, just outside of Greensboro, North Carolina, on July 24, 1930, to Marvin Bishop Brooks and Mattie (née Reives) Brooks (1886-1967; 1889-1959).¹ Marvin and Mattie Brooks would have sixteen children in all, ten girls and six boys, four of whom died before C. D. was born. The Brooks earned a livelihood by farming their 40-acre property in Morehead, cultivating a variety of crops and raising livestock and poultry.²

Shortly after C. D.’s birth the Brooks family, although Methodists at the time, began observing the seventh-day Sabbath in honor of a pledge Mattie Brooks had made to God while in a hospital bed suffering from a near-fatal illness. The family observed the Sabbath and read *The Great Controversy* for years without knowing of the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Finally, in 1940 the family took Bible studies with Napoleon Smith, pastor of the black Seventh-day Adventist church in Greensboro, and C. D., his mother, and six sisters were baptized.³

C. D. Brooks attended James B. Dudley High School in Greensboro and as editor of the school paper demonstrated a facility in the English language that would later distinguish his preaching. Upon graduating in



C. D. Brooks

Photo courtesy of Benjamin Baker, received from the late C. D. Brooks.

1947 he planned to study dentistry at the local North Carolina Agricultural and Technology College. However, that summer he attended tent meetings in Greensboro conducted by E. E. Cleveland and was so moved by the powerful experience that he jettisoned his former plans and decided to study for the ministry at Oakwood College. Brooks would later quip that he went from wanting to “pursue a career fighting tooth decay to one fighting truth decay.”⁴

C. D. Brooks studied theology at Oakwood College from 1947 to 1951, paying his way through school by milking cows at the school’s dairy farm, as a packer in a meat factory, and other odd jobs. He was mentored by notable professors Eva B. Dykes and Calvin E. Moseley, as well as college president Frank L. Peterson and campus resident Anna Knight. As a student Brooks spearheaded the construction of the Bell Tower and was editor of the school yearbook his senior year.⁵

Also while at Oakwood C. D. met Walterene Wagner, an education major from Pennsylvania. Wagner was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on July 23, 1932, to John H. Wagner, Sr., the first president of Allegheny Conference and the second president of South Atlantic Conference, and Jessie (née Fordham) Wagner, an educator. Both of Walterene’s brothers would become noted Adventist ministers, her brother Jesse being president of Lake Region Conference for seven years. Walterene was a member of the charter class at Pine Forge Academy, which her parents founded. C. D. and Walterene were wed on September 14, 1952, at the Ebenezer Seventh-day Adventist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.⁶ The Brooks’ union lasted 64 years until C. D.’s death in 2016. Throughout their marriage Walterene supported C. D. in his ministry and had a distinguished career in education of more than forty years. The couple had two children, Diedra and Charles II.⁷

Ministry

The Allegheny Conference hired Brooks after his graduation from Oakwood in late spring of 1951. Regional conferences had begun to operate just six years earlier, so Brooks was one of the early cohorts of ministerial graduates to be hired by the new black-administered conferences.⁸ His first assignment was as an intern with veteran Antiguan minister J. G. Dasent for an evangelistic meeting in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. His first pastoral assignment came months later at churches in Wilmington, Delaware, and Chester, Pennsylvania. From 1952 to 1957 Brooks pastored a four-church district—Camden, Bridgeton, Jericho, and Salem—in New Jersey. During these years Brooks conducted several noteworthy evangelistic campaigns that began to establish himself as an up-and-coming evangelist.⁹

From 1957 to 1959 Brooks pastored the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church in Columbus, Ohio, one of black Adventism’s most accomplished congregations. As pastor Brooks regularly conducted successful tent meetings both in the cities in which he pastored and as a guest evangelist in other conferences. His rule was, “Don’t ask anybody for permission—just put up your tent and start preaching.”¹⁰ His preaching style was forceful and direct, unflinching yet tender, and one that resonated with a wide range of people of different backgrounds. In

1957 the Allegheny Conference set a goal to baptize 1,000 people in one year. It was ultimately fell short at 911, but there were only two ministers who baptized 100 or more: George H. Rainey and C. D. Brooks.¹¹

In 1959 Brooks began pastoring the Glenville Seventh-day Adventist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Glenville was a thriving congregation that had expanded with African American's migration to northern cities for jobs and better living conditions. Brooks was preceded as pastor by J. H. Laurence, R. T. Hudson, and Walter M. Starks, and his appointment to the post while still in his twenties was a heady responsibility. But he did not disappoint. While at Glenville, in an era of prolific evangelists, perennially Brooks had either the highest, or was in the top three, in baptisms in his conference. In the summer of 1961 alone Brooks baptized 179, the new influx of converts putting the membership of Glenville above 1,000. In his final evangelistic series in Cleveland, Brooks baptized 108.¹²

In 1963 Neal Wilson, president of the Columbia Union Conference, asked Brooks to be the field secretary for the union, at the time a risky but calculated move. Wilson, who first called Brooks "C.D." to distinguish him from the renowned singing evangelist Charles Lee Brooks, figured that a man of Brooks' caliber could do much to break down the entrenched racial barriers in the union and the wider church. As field secretary for two years and ministerial secretary from 1966 to 1971, Brooks toured the union speaking, preaching, training ministers, and evangelizing.¹³ One of Brooks' stipulations when he accepted Wilson's job offer was that he be able to continue running evangelistic meetings, and this he did in a number of high-yield campaigns, including ones in Philadelphia (1964), Newark (1966), and Cairo, Egypt (1967).

In 1971 General Conference president Robert H. Pierson appointed Brooks a field secretary of the world church. In this position Brooks was one of seven general field secretaries, essentially a point-man for the denomination, assigned to any type of field service or project in which the world church needed him. As field secretary Brooks trained hundreds of more ministers in preaching, and conducted revival meetings on six continents, once quipping, "I didn't want to go to Antarctica because there was no one to preach to." In a crusade in Jamaica in 1972 Brooks baptized more than 500, and 243 the next year in Chicago.¹⁴ Numerous churches were established from his meetings.

In 1974 Walter Arties, a seasoned Adventist media personality, convinced Brooks to become speaker-director for a new television ministry that he had founded called Breath of Life. Initially wary of television because he preferred speaking to live audiences, Brooks agreed to the idea, realizing that television was a medium to reach more people than he could possibly reach speaking in person in tents or halls. Brooks began as speaker in July 1974, several times a year recording for Breath of Life in the television studios at the Adventist Media Center in Thousand Oaks, California. From its inception Breath of Life was a General Conference ministry, funded by the church, as well as from offerings and donations. The early production team consisted of Arties and *Message* magazine editor Louis B. Reynolds, with musical groups such as the Breath of Life Quartet and features from Wintley Phipps, Ullanda Innocent-Palmer, Eleanor Wright, and T. Marshall Kelly. As for the speaker-director,

Brooks turned out to be a natural in front of the camera.¹⁵

Breath of Life Ministries developed a well-honed system of evangelism: the ministry team planned an evangelistic meeting in a large city, purchased television time on a local station and air the Breath of Life telecast, went door to door distributing flyers advertising the television program and the evangelistic series, and after weeks of airing the show launched an evangelistic series with Brooks as speaker. Using this modus operandi, Breath of Life ran hugely successful evangelistic campaigns in dozens of U.S. and international cities, among the most memorable at the Warner Theatre in Washington, D.C., in 1978, in which over 300 were baptized and a Breath of Life congregation was organized; Barbados in 1989 in which 520 were baptized; and in Brooklyn, New York, in 1991 with 308.¹⁶ In 1989 Breath of Life aired on Black Entertainment Television (BET), potentially reaching 90 million people per week in the United States and Caribbean.¹⁷ In addition to television, Brooks' messages were distributed by cassette, VHS, and later CDs and DVDs, in the tens of thousands.

Brooks was speaker-director of Breath of Life Ministries for 23 years, from 1974 to 1997. In his time at the helm, the ministry brought approximately 15,000 people to Christ, established 15 Breath of Life congregations, and was viewed by scores of millions. Brooks personally experienced many singular honors throughout these years, including speaking at Ronald Reagan's religious inaugural celebration in 1981; preaching at several General Conference sessions; receiving an honorary doctorate from Andrews University in 1985; being asked by the General Conference to serve as a vice president in 1985; in 1989 being featured on the "Christ of the Narrow Way" painting, commissioned by the Ellen G. White Estate; in 1994 being inducted into the Martin Luther King, Jr. Board of Preachers and Collegium of Scholars at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia; and gracing the Founder's Wall at the Adventist Media Center. Brooks also participated in Net '95, the largest evangelistic program in Seventh-day Adventist history up to the time. Brooks' last meeting as Breath of Life speaker was in March and April of 1995 in Phoenix, Arizona.¹⁸

Retirement

On June 10, 1995, shortly after concluding a sermon at the South Central Conference camp meeting on the campus of Oakwood University, C. D. Brooks had a heart attack. On January 1, 1996, he officially retired as General Conference field secretary, the longest to hold the position, and as speaker-director for Breath of Life in the spring of 1997. He was honored with various ceremonies at the world headquarters and other venues.¹⁹

Brooks had a long and productive retirement. In 2007 in honor of E. E. Cleveland, Charles Bradford, and Brooks, the Bradford-Cleveland-Brooks Leadership Center (BCBLC) was established on the campus of Oakwood University, a 10,000-square-foot, \$2.5 million state-of-the-art edifice. In 2010 Brooks preached a series for Hope Channel on the theme "Revival and Reformation," and spoke for a similar series on 3ABN. That same year in December the Ellen G. White Estate elected Brooks a lifetime member of its board. On February 24, 2013, Brooks was appointed chaplain of the North American Division. Later that year in November 2013, a full-length

biography of Brooks, *C.D.: The Man Behind the Message*, was published by the Review and Herald. Consistent with his pioneering media ministry, with the advent and rise of social media and video and audio-sharing websites, Brooks' sermons and ministry gained a new life on the internet with hundreds of thousands of views, reaching new generations.

In early 2016 C. D. Brooks was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He died on the morning of June 5, 2016. His obituaries appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other national media outlets.²⁰

Contribution

C. D. Brooks is among the most prolific evangelists in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, directly responsible for baptizing some 20,000 people. His sixty years of ministry transformed the global church. In the early part of his ministry his pastoring and soul-winning did much to establish regional conferences and make them viable administrative units in the church. As a field secretary for the Columbia Union, he was instrumental in improving the church's tortured race relations in its leading organizational unit. Brooks was the longest-serving field secretary of the General Conference, and in his nearly a quarter decade in the position he trained hundreds of ministers in effective evangelism and won thousands to Christ around the world, contributing to the unprecedented decades of soul-winning by the church in the 1980s and 1990s. His no-nonsense, clear preaching of the Adventist message influenced many others to be serious about preaching the gospel.

As speaker-director of Breath of Life, one of the earliest black religious continuing programs and the longest running black religious programming, Brooks took his place among Adventist media trailblazers such as H.M.S. Richards ("Voice of Prophecy"), George Vandeman ("It Is Written"), and William Fagal ("Faith for Today"), inaugurating the era of mass evangelism that would burgeon into global campaigns such as the Nets. He inspired a second wave of Adventist televangelists, including Dan Matthews, Dwight Nelson, Mark Finley, Lonnie Melashenko, Walter Pearson, and Doug Batchelor. The many millions that have been reached with the gospel through these individuals and their ministries, which continue to this day, cannot be calculated. In sum, C. D. Brooks greatly shaped twentieth-century Adventism and his influence will undoubtedly continue to shape the church in the future.

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