

Scott, Sydney

(1874–1934)

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One of Adventism's first Oakwood-educated ministers, Sydney Scott was a prominent leader in the rise of Adventism among African Americans in the South and Midwest.

Early Years

Sydney Scott's parents, John (1847-1926) and Emma (1858-1921), both were born before the Civil War in slaveholding states—his father in Virginia and his mother in Georgia. After the war they settled in rural Ellis County, south of Dallas, Texas. Sydney, born in 1874, was their first child. By 1880, the Scotts added two daughters, Eliza (b. 1876) and Autinell (b. 1878), and a second son, Claud (b. 1880), to their family.¹

Sydney attended public schools in Texas and Oklahoma prior to his arrival in Huntsville, Alabama, around 1898 as a student at Oakwood Manual Training School, founded by Seventh-day Adventists in 1896.² In 1901 he began full-time ministry in the Kansas Conference. On November 24 of the same year Sydney married school teacher Fannie Hodnett (1875-1958) in Van Buren, Arkansas.³ Throughout his career she would be directly associated with him in ministry and for a number of years (1909-1914) a salaried conference worker. They had two daughters: Jewel (b. 1907) and Emma (b. 1914).⁴



Sydney Scott

Photo courtesy of South Central Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

In association with Robert L. Bradford and S. S. Ryles, Scott evangelized in Kansas City, Kansas, leading to organization of a church of 14 members in September 1902 and construction of a house of worship dedicated on January 24, 1904.⁵ Later in 1904, Scott was ordained at Newton, Kansas, by the conference president, Chester M. McReynolds.⁶ Through the summer of 1906, Scott continued to minister at various locales in Kansas and Missouri.

Deep South Evangelism

In the Fall of 1906 Scott was sent to the Deep South for evangelism among African Americans. Because the state conferences throughout much of the South were still small and impoverished, the Kansas Conference (joined by the Missouri Conference until 1908), continued to pay Scott's salary as a mission project for the next three years. At the end of 1909, Scott reported that during these three years he held "eight large tent meetings" in four states—Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, and South Carolina. In some places, such as Birmingham, Alabama, he built on work previously initiated on a small scale. In others, such as Mobile, Alabama, he introduced Adventism for the first time. He had preached 350 sermons attended by an average of 250 people on weeknights and 350 on Sunday nights and held 400 Bible readings. Through these measures he claimed to have reached a total of 10,000 people with the Adventist message with 125 accepting it, 75 of whom were baptized.⁷ The scope of this pioneering work is illumined by the fact that the total number of Black Adventists in the South at this time was approximately 900.⁸

Scott's thorough (albeit generalized) statistical report reflects a strong interest in charting and chronicling the progress of the Black Adventist cause. His statistical overviews, particularly two published in the *Gospel Herald* in 1907, provide valuable information on an era for which sources are sparse.⁹ However, it was not a bookish, retiring personality that prompted him to collect and report such information. It was instead desire to exert influence on behalf of plans and policies best calculated to foster Adventism among African Americans during an era (c. 1890-1930) in which racial segregation was more entrenched in the South and racist assumptions more pervasive throughout the nation than at any time since the Civil War.

A forceful preacher, Scott was also described by contemporaries as a "driver,"¹⁰ a man of "very positive conviction and fearless energy."¹¹ In other words, he had an agenda and was willing to risk confrontation in asserting it but remained a "team player" in the denominational workforce.

Color vs. Truth?

Throughout Scott's career, the question of loyalty to church organization dominated the Adventist racial horizon. Two of the era's most effective Black Adventist ministers, Lewis C. Sheafe (1907) and John W. Manns (1916), broke away from the denomination, protesting racial injustice in church institutions and endeavoring to establish separate and independent forms of Black Adventist organization.¹² Scott believed that the racial

turbulence could best be navigated with two guiding principles: 1) firm allegiance to church organization as constituted by the General Conference; and 2) unyielding insistence on empowerment of Black leadership and institutions in those settings where work along separate racial lines was deemed necessary.

While he engaged in evangelism in Alabama and South Carolina in 1907 and 1908, Scott sought to reconcile Sheafe and his Washington, D.C congregation with the General Conference leadership. Scott believed that in withdrawing from the denomination Sheafe had erred by placing demands for immediate rectification of racial injustice (“color”) ahead of loyalty to the Adventist message (“truth”). In a letter to GC president Arthur G. Daniells, Scott affirmed: “Color is skin deep; truth is everlasting. Any movement which hath color as its reason *for separating from the body has a foundation too shallow to stand the test*” And, Scott regarded the church organization that Adventists believe came into being under divine leadership as an indispensable aspect of “truth.” The Adventist message, or third angel’s message, he wrote “was given to the body and it is to be carried by the body—the church.” An organ that severed itself from the main body would soon die for lack of blood supply, he reasoned.¹³

A Call for Structural Change

While assuring Daniells of an unswerving loyalty to “the church organization of the S.D.A.,”¹⁴ Scott was forthright in seeking to impress upon white denominational leaders the necessity of change in order for Adventism to flourish more fully among African Americans. He was one of 12 Black ministers who signed an “An Appeal in Behalf of the Work among the Colored People” sent to the General Conference Committee for consideration at the 1909 General Conference session. The ministers warned that the issues raised by the Sheafe movement would not go away and called for action to “restore and conserve, the confidence of the race” in order to avert a racial schism such as experienced by many American Protestant denominations.¹⁵

The “Appeal” did not specify what should be done, but Scott was convinced that the “advance step” needed was to “throw more responsibility on the colored constituents” by organizing a “Negro conference” or conferences.¹⁶ Charles Kinny had proposed in 1889 that this step be taken when the number of Black churches grew sufficiently to warrant it.¹⁷ Twenty years later, though, it was regarded as too radical to be given serious consideration and Scott’s plan got little traction even from other Black ministers.¹⁸

A different step was taken at the 1909 General Conference—formation of a North American Negro Department to bring greater energy and coordination to endeavors on behalf of the nation’s Black population. Though willing to cooperate with the new department, Scott expressed greater reservations about its efficacy than did his colleagues. He saw that in the Adventist system, a department could advise and promote but lacked the decision-making authority that a conference holds with regard to personnel, policies, and funding.

“In the South, our people are losing confidence in the white man,” Scott frankly stated during discussion of the recommended department at the 1909 session. “It is just as well to handle this question without gloves,” he

added. As he saw it, “representation” was key: “If this departmental work is carried out on a plan that will give a just representation to the negro churches, then I say, ‘Amen,’ to the plan. If it will be one-sided, then I say ‘No’ in the loudest tone.”¹⁹

Particularly for its first nine years when it operated under the control of white leaders, the North American Negro Department did not provide anything like the “just representation” that Scott called for. Still, most then and since have seen it as a worthwhile, early step forward in the quest for racial parity in denominational governance.²⁰

Carolina Campaigns

After the 1909 General Conference, Scott returned to evangelism in South Carolina, where he had labored since December 1907. His most successful effort during 1908 had been in Greenville, where a church and church school were established and, he claimed, his evangelism had stirred a flame in the city that was still at “white heat stage” a month after his meetings closed.²¹ Now, in September 1909, he launched a new campaign in Columbia, the state’s capital city, and the impact proved even more gratifying. When he began, only two adherents to the Adventist message could be found in the city’s Black community. A year and a half later, a baptismal service on March 18, 1911, brought the membership of the new church planted there to 60.²²

He experienced similar success in North Carolina. Attendance at meetings begun June 4, 1911, at New Bern rapidly overwhelmed the small tent that was utilized, requiring the North Carolina Conference to replace it with “one of the finest field tents ever purchased for the colored work in the south.” Fifty persons were baptized at a service in mid-October, bringing to 70 the number of Sabbathkeepers comprising the new congregation.²³

As result of his campaign in Wilmington the following year, a Sabbath School with 115 members was organized. According to North Carolina Conference president Stewart Kime, the meetings drew “quite an attendance from whites,” and he dispatched two Bible workers to follow up with the interest among that segment of the population.²⁴ A month later, on Sabbath, November 15, 1912, Elder Kime organized a “white church” that had “a charter membership of nine.” He then proceeded to the rented hall where the Black believers were meeting and gave “a most rigid examination” to those applying for church membership, advising that many of them wait until they had “a better understanding of some points of truth.” He recommended admittance of the 45 he did approve into what he called “the second Seventh-day Adventist church of Wilmington” even though its membership was five times larger than the church he organized earlier that day.²⁵ Two years later, at the end of 1914, the membership at the second-organized Wilmington church had increased to 100, with 88 reporting involvement in missionary activity.²⁶

Scott’s pioneering evangelistic achievements established an enduring foundation for Black Adventism in the Carolinas and left an impression that did not quickly fade. Thirty years later, it was in North Carolina that 21-

year-old Earl E. Cleveland, later of great renown as an Adventist evangelist, had remarkable success in his very first campaigns.²⁷ H. E. Lysinger, the conference president at that time, is reported to have predicted that Cleveland would be “the next Sidney Scott if he will keep his feet on the ground.”²⁸

Bible Chautauqua Campaigns

In 1913, Scott was called to the Southern Union Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, to serve in a capacity often called “union evangelist” during that era. The position carried administrative responsibility—supervising and writing reports about the Black evangelistic and ministerial work throughout the union—but no executive title or authority.²⁹ The executive officers of the Southern Union Conference held complete administrative authority over the Southern Union Mission, as the Black work throughout the union was then designated, with Scott being listed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* only as a minister and one member of the large union mission committee.³⁰

In addition to his supervisory role, Scott maintained a heavy schedule of evangelistic campaigns. His major effort in 1916, held in Memphis, Tennessee, is one instance pointing to Scott as something of a pacesetter in evangelistic methodology. As early as 1911 he had used the phrase “Bible Chautauqua” to name a Bible study course provided in connection with his evangelistic series in New Bern, North Carolina.³¹ But it was apparently in Nashville in 1914 that he first used “Bible Chautauqua Lecture Course” as an overall rubric for an evangelistic series, and he did so in an even more pronounced way with a better-attended effort in Memphis in 1916.³² The label would be widely adopted by Adventist evangelists over the following three decades, and Scott was one of the first, possibly the very first, to use it.³³ It designated a style or mode of evangelism that emphasized the educational value of the sermons by characterizing them as a course of “lectures.” Healthful living was often made the standout theme, with the participation of educational and civic leaders in promoting public health. In Memphis, Scott succeeded in involving leading local physicians and the president of the city Board of Health along with other public officials.

Scott was called to evangelistic work in the Southwestern Union in late 1916. He conducted Bible Chautauqua campaigns in Pine Bluff and Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1917, and in Dallas, Texas, in 1918. As he had begun to do while still in the Southern Union, Scott offered a training institute for workers covering all aspects of public evangelism in conjunction with each of these campaigns.³⁴

However, the evangelist’s most noteworthy success during this phase of his career came in the unlikely locale of Blythe, California, a small town about seven miles from the Arizona state border. On loan from the Southwestern Union to the Pacific Union Conference, Scott conducted his Bible Chautauqua Campaign in Blythe for six weeks, March-April 1919. The meetings drew the “leading citizens” of the town with the attendance often overcrowding the tent. White people comprised at least half of the attendees. On May 3, 26 people were baptized, and the number of those who became Seventh-day Adventists as a result of the meetings eventually

reached nearly 50.³⁵ The testimony of one of the several white converts, N. Buehler, was published in the *Youth's Instructor*. He was drawn by a "thundering voice" emanating from a "large tent tabernacle," where he found "the sermons of Sydney Scott, the colored preacher from Texas, interesting and fascinating" and the message a resolution to the wanderings of a turbulent spiritual journey.³⁶

However, after another major campaign in Dallas, Scott "collapsed under a nervous strain" on November 11, 1919. On the advice of physicians, he went on an extended disability leave, receiving retirement-level support from the denomination's sustentation fund. He returned to California and worked outdoors on a small piece of property he secured in Palo Verde Valley, about 30 miles south of Blythe.³⁷

Later Ministry

Scott felt ready and eager to resume ministry in early 1922 when the Southeastern California Conference called upon him to conduct an evangelistic campaign in San Diego to build up a small, newly-formed group of Black Adventists. The meetings attracted a large attendance from "the colored, Spanish, and white races" and a house of worship was constructed to house the congregation, later known as the San Diego 31st Street Church.³⁸

In the Fall of 1922 Scott returned to full-time ministry, accepting a call from the Indiana Conference to pastoral and evangelistic work based in Indianapolis. He served two years there, then returned to the vicinity where his ministry began nearly 25 years before, as pastor-evangelist in Kansas City, Missouri. He conducted major evangelistic efforts yearly in both of these locales, with 25 new members resulting from his 1925 campaign in Kansas City.³⁹ However, he may never have fully recovered his earlier vigor, and a second "nervous breakdown" near the close of 1926 again necessitated withdrawal from ministerial work. After he received treatment at Kansas Sanitarium and Hospital in Wichita, Scott and his wife moved back to southern California and resided in Riverside.⁴⁰

The hoped-for recovery and resumption of full-time ministry never happened, but as he was able, Scott was active in the work of churches in San Bernardino and San Diego, supporting their efforts with his wealth of experience. While he was driving home from a group Bible study ("cottage meeting") on a Friday evening, an automobile collision left him unconscious. Attempts to revive him at Loma Linda Hospital did not succeed and he died at age 60 on April 15, 1934.⁴¹ After her husband's death, Fannie H. Scott moved to Los Angeles where she was involved with the Dorcas Society and working for children at the Wadsworth church. She died on June 29, 1958, at age 83.⁴²

Legacy

If anyone could be called the "father" of Black Seventh-day Adventism in the Carolinas, it would have to be Sydney Scott. There and in many other locales throughout the South, Midwest, and West Coast, his work was

prominent in the pioneering evangelism that initiated Seventh-day Adventism's enduring and growing presence in Black America. The membership of African American Seventh-day Adventist congregations grew from around 150 when Scott began his ministry in 1901 to 4,700 by the end of 1919, hundreds of whom joined the church as a direct result of efforts he led.⁴³

Amidst recurring turbulence over whether Black Adventists would remain connected with the larger Seventh-day Adventist body or organize independently, Scott affirmed a separate and empowered Black work within the framework of dogged loyalty to church organization headed by the General Conference. He sustained advocacy for Black conferences initially recommended by Charles Kinny in 1889, even though by the time he did so in 1908-1909, it had become highly controversial and openly supported by few others. In this he proved to be ahead of his time; another 35 difficult years lay ahead before the plan gained the approval of the General Conference leadership in 1944. At the same time, the inclusive appeal of Scott's evangelism, seen especially in Wilmington, Blythe, and San Diego, show that for him the Black conference proposal was not an ideal to be sought or imposed, but a method for advancing the Adventist message among Americans of African descent as effectively as possible in the context of racially oppressive realities.

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