

# Clifford, Francis George (1899–1972)

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British-born Francis George Clifford served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for over forty years as a pastor-evangelist, departmental leader, and senior church administrator in two world divisions. For thirty-three years, he served in South Africa in local pastoral and conference roles (including twelve months in Southern Rhodesia—what is now Zimbabwe) before being called into Union and then

Division administration. For eight years, he served as president of the Australasian Division where he presided over a period of impressive growth and was remembered by colleagues for his “dynamic, talented, fearless,” leadership.<sup>1</sup>

## Family Background and Education (1899-1923)

Born on April 16, 1899, in the country village of South Stoke, near Bath in southwest England, Francis George Clifford was the youngest of six children born to Edward Clifford and Lydia Ann George. His parents came from laboring Somerset families—the Georges from Chantry, near Frome, and the Cliffords from Coombe Hay, five miles south of Bath.<sup>2</sup> In late 1892, at aged twenty-eight, Edward Clifford, a carpenter, along with one of his brothers, began attending public meetings conducted in a large public hall in Bath by American Adventist evangelist Judson Washburn. Convicted on the teaching about the Sabbath, Edward Clifford shared his



Francis G. Clifford

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

convictions with Lydia George, his fiancée, and in February 1893 they both determined to keep the Sabbath. A month later they married and settled in the tiny village of South Stoke, three and a half miles from the center of Bath. In June of that year, Washburn baptized the newlyweds, his first converts in England, and they became charter members of the newly established Adventist Church in Bath. Later, Edward Clifford became the elder of the South Stoke church, was active as a lay colporteur, and served for many years as an influential lay member of the South England Conference Executive Committee.<sup>3</sup>

Francis Clifford was, thus, nurtured in a rural home that valued industry and frugality together with Christian piety and witness. He attended the Church of England elementary school in South Stoke village, earning certificates for good attendance, and progressed on to the junior school section completing his studies there in September 1912.<sup>4</sup> He was baptized as an Adventist the following year at age fourteen.

In early 1917, as an eighteen-year old, Clifford experienced the loss of his mother after a rapid decline in her health. Soon afterwards he was conscripted to serve in the military in the last stages of World War I. He registered as a conscientious objector.<sup>5</sup> Whether he was assigned to the work parties or confined to Dartmoor Prison with other Adventist conscientious objectors is not clear. His older brother, Jesse, in spite of his request to be a non-combatant had been assigned to Le Havre in France where he was court-martialed along with thirteen other Adventist conscripts when they refused to work on Sabbath.<sup>6</sup>

Upon Francis Clifford's discharge from the army in 1919, he spent a year in Exeter as a colporteur, selling *Great Controversy* and Uriah Smith's *Daniel and Revelation*. In 1920, he enrolled at Stanborough Park Missionary College just after its managers had purchased an additional 165 acres and expanded the curriculum to include agriculture and other industrial programs. During Clifford's time at the school in the immediate, post-war years, enrollment mushroomed from a suppressed war-time attendance of seventy-five to more than 200.<sup>7</sup>

Clifford completed two years of ministerial training at Stanborough Park and in December 1922 married Edna Reedham Edmed, a shorthand teacher at the college and the daughter of Herbert and Annie Edmed.<sup>8</sup> Edna Edmed's British-born father pastored the North London Church, served as area evangelist, and as a member of most church committees in the British Union.<sup>9</sup> Her father had returned to the United Kingdom in 1916 after having lived for some years in South Africa where he had served as president of the Natal-Transval and the Cape Conferences. Annie Edmed was South African by birth and had become an Adventist in 1888. She was a charter member of the Claremont Church in Capetown.<sup>10</sup> In South Africa, Edna Edmed (known as Tiny to her friends) had served as a secretary in the Home Missions Department in the South African Union Conference but moved to England to join her parents.<sup>11</sup>

In mid-1921, while Edna Edmed was teaching at Stanborough, her parents accepted another mission appointment to the West Indies, where her father became the president of the South Caribbean Conference.<sup>12</sup> Her mother died in Trinidad just two years later in July 1924, not long after Francis and Edna Clifford had

themselves left England for a mission appointment. In early 1923, shortly after their marriage, the newly-wed Cliffords accepted a call to South Africa and spent their first year in that field at the new college established by J. I. Robison at Spion Kop in Natal Province.<sup>13</sup> Francis Clifford studied at the college while Edna Clifford again taught commercial studies.<sup>14</sup>

## Early Ministry (1924-1933)

Francis Clifford began his ministry in November 1923 as an evangelist in the Cape Conference headquartered in Port Elizabeth. His giftedness as a preacher and soul winner, as well as his potential for church leadership were recognized early. In his second year of ministry, Clifford was elected to the conference executive committee although he was only a licentiate minister. He found early success as an evangelist in the towns around Capetown.<sup>15</sup> During the next four years, he continued in pastoral-evangelistic work in the white Cape Conference, successfully conducting evangelistic meetings in places such as Claremont in 1927, Grahamstown and Port Elisabeth in 1928, and Wynberg in 1927 and 1929.<sup>16</sup> On April 30, 1927, at the conclusion of the biennial Cape Conference session, Clifford was ordained to gospel ministry.<sup>17</sup> During these first years of ministry, three sons joined the Clifford family, Roy Edward born in August 1925, Gerald Francis born in June 1927, and Herbert (Bert) Edward born in November 1929. All three would become Adventist ministers and administrators, serving the Church with distinction in Africa and the South Pacific—Roy in treasury work, Gerald in educational leadership, and Bert in hospital leadership.

In early 1930, Clifford transferred north to Johannesburg in the Natal-Transvaal Conference to continue pastoral-evangelistic work. Successful campaigns with many baptisms followed in Johannesburg and Bloemfontein, and he was, once again, soon elected to the conference executive committee.<sup>18</sup>

## Departmental Administration (1934-1941)

In late 1933, following a conference reorganization to reduce administrative costs, Clifford was called into departmental leadership under the presidency of Nathaniel C. Wilson. This involved relocation to the city of Bloemfontein in the Transvaal where for two years, 1934-1935, Clifford carried a joint appointment as Home Missions and Sabbath School department director for both the South African Union Conference (SAUC) and the South African Division Conference.<sup>19</sup> In 1936, he accepted a call to go to Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia where he served for over a year in public evangelism, but in 1937 he was called back to Bloemfontein to rejoin the South African Union departmental staff, this time with responsibility for Sabbath School and the Young People's Missionary Volunteer departments.<sup>20</sup> He held these positions for two years, but by the beginning of 1941 he responded to a call to move back to Capetown where he joined the departmental staff of the Trans-African Division. Here he took responsibility for three portfolios: publishing, home missions, and youth, and was appreciated for his "strong leadership."<sup>21</sup> His field of service was to change two years later when, at the end of

1941, he was called north again to Bloemfontein.

## President, South African Union (1941-1946)

In October, 1941, A. F. Tarr, who had been president of the SAUC for the previous six years, was called to India to serve as secretary of the Southern Asia Division.<sup>22</sup> At the year-end meetings of the SAUC executive, Clifford, at the age of 42, was appointed the new president.<sup>23</sup> He faced his first re-election four months later at the quadrennial session in April 1942 and ultimately served through the remainder of the difficult war years until 1946. War-time conditions and the consequential shortage of resources created difficulties for evangelism and prevented large camp meetings. Nevertheless, under his leadership, membership increased by 1,737 new members, “the largest membership gain for any five-year period” in the history of the union. In all, thirty new churches were added during the period. Particularly satisfying to Clifford as he looked back on his time as union president was the fact that the largest gains had been among the native peoples (the Cape field, Bantu Mission fields, and the Indian work) reflecting the greater emphasis that he had given to evangelism in those sections of the work. Separate statistics were kept for the different population groups, which reflected the way the church and its mission was structured. If Clifford saw the need for a more integrated worshipping and witness community, he appears to have felt unable to achieve this goal or to resist the intensifying racial divisions in society and in the Church during the period he served as president. Since its beginning in South Africa, the Adventist Church, focused exclusively on an imminent return of Christ, had simply adopted society’s racial fault lines together with their gross inequities into the church structures and had codified them.<sup>24</sup> Preaching and evangelism were the all-important concerns. As Clifford reviewed developments during his leadership, he was also glad for the substantial increase in the level of financial support for the church with tithe increasing by 118 per cent and mission offerings by 130 per cent during the five-year period.<sup>25</sup>

## Division Leadership (1946 -1962)

At the 1946 General Conference session in Washington DC, Clifford, with a rich diversity of evangelistic experience and church leadership behind him, was elected to serve as the secretary of the Southern Africa Division. He replaced Milton Robison who now took up the duties of field secretary.<sup>26</sup> Attached to the role was editorship of the *South African Division Outlook* for which Clifford was eminently qualified as a gifted writer. Clifford served for two four-year terms as division secretary during a time of rapid membership growth. Division membership more than doubled from almost 48,000 to over 100,000. Much of the new growth occurred in the Congo and East African Union, and Clifford was much encouraged at the steady increase of African workers across the division. By 1953, they comprised 84% of workers.<sup>27</sup>

As South African society implemented apartheid more rigorously in the early 1950s following the election of Dr. Malan’s all-white Nationalist Party to government in 1948, Adventist Afrikaners urged the church to fall into line

with government policy and church administration complied. The SAUC session decided in 1949 that in the future, in line with apartheid policy, all delegates to its sessions would be white. Whites would represent the non-white membership. Furthermore, the Adventist workforce was divided into Groups I and II with those working for non-whites designated as Group II. There was no non-white leadership.<sup>28</sup> In 1953, a parallel decision was taken by the Trans African Division then headquartered in Capetown. Neither Clifford nor any of his colleagues felt able to speak publicly against the injustices of apartheid. Not until the 1990s, following the national Truth and Reconciliation Committee meetings, would the legacies of apartheid in the Adventist church begin to be unwound.<sup>29</sup>

Surprised by the resignation of William H. Branson as General Conference president at the 1954 session in San Francisco, because of ill-health, and his replacement by Reuben. R. Figuhr, Clifford was even more surprised at his own election to the presidency of the Australasian Division. American Fred A. Mote, who had served the Australasian division as secretary and then president, had been pressed to accept a call to the presidency of the Far Eastern Division based in Singapore. Mote's skill and experience developed as a longtime former missionary to the Philippines was especially needed at the time in that diverse field.<sup>30</sup>

Australasian leaders, lamenting the too-soon departure of Mote, welcomed Clifford diffidently at first, as an "Englishman" with seventeen years of service to Africa. His long experience working among native people, however, "augurs well" for Australasia, explained the *Record* editor.<sup>31</sup> Clifford's warm personality, his perceived diplomatic skills (he acknowledged "the wise leadership under the blessing of God," of those who preceded him), and his statesman like strategic vision impressed his new colleagues in leadership.<sup>32</sup> During eight years as president in the Australasian division, Clifford, with what Geoffrey Garne later noted as "his warmth and gentleness as a person," endeared himself to his colleagues.<sup>33</sup> They responded to what they saw as his dynamic and fearless service. His eloquence in preaching and insightful devotional writing won the hearts of church members as he fostered steady growth in both mission field and homeland. During his second term of leadership, for example, sixty-nine churches were added across the division and tithe income increased by 35.9 per cent. He oversaw the building of two new hospitals in the island fields, one on the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands and the other at Sopas in New Guinea. Two new health food factories were built and expansions of the publishing house and the division's colleges were necessary to cope with the growth.<sup>34</sup>

Clifford experienced a heart attack, which led to a period of ill health during late 1961 and early 1962, limiting his ability to engage in demanding public labor in the last six months of his term. Medical advice subsequently led him at the age of sixty-three to relinquish his leadership to the "deep regret," of his associates.<sup>35</sup> Fellow Australasian delegates at the 1962 General Conference session were impressed with steely self-discipline with which he presented his president's report. It was his "first public appearance for some months."<sup>36</sup> Facing an uncertain future he stepped aside and was replaced by Laurence C. Naden. At the end of the year, with determination to recover his health, he returned to South Africa where his three sons worked in denominational

service.

## Retirement (1962-1972)

Clifford's poor health did not allow him to return to church employment. He made his home first, on the south coast of Natal, and then later, in the Adventist retirement village among the hills at Adventhaven in Cape Province. His last years were shadowed by cancer, which a friend observed was a "long and painful illness." This further limited his activities, but from time to time as health allowed, he participated as a counselor in major meetings of the Trans-Africa Division. His long experience in administration and his sound judgement also enabled him on a number of occasions to serve as a mediator during times of tension in the late 1960s between Afrikaans- and English-speaking Adventists. His home became a useful meeting place.<sup>37</sup> He also continued regularly to write devotional articles for his church paper and took pleasure in the service of his minister sons.<sup>38</sup> At the time, Roy Clifford served as president of the South African Union and Gerald Clifford served as division secretary of the Sabbath School and education departments.<sup>39</sup>

Francis Clifford died on April 25, 1972. By the time of his death, two of his sons had been called to serve in Australia, Gerald Clifford as the academic dean at Avondale College and Bert Clifford as the medical director of the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital. Roy Clifford, still in Africa, served as secretary of the Trans-Africa Division. Edna Clifford survived her husband by sixteen years.<sup>40</sup> After funeral services conducted by Elder Merle Mills, president of the Trans-African Division, Clifford was interred at Sedhaven.<sup>41</sup>

## Contribution

Francis G. Clifford's distinctive contribution to the church through his pastoral work and his administration was to help focus the church he loved and wholeheartedly served on its priorities of evangelism and the spiritual growth of its members. Across South Africa, many church members gratefully acknowledged him as the pastor who introduced them to the church. His diplomatic and statesman like leadership of the church during periods of difficult political and social development helped keep the church together. In Australasia, his charisma as a speaker, and his energy and wisdom helped guide the church through a period of rapid membership and institutional growth. He is remembered as visionary leader.

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