



Jacob Justiss preaching at Pioneer Memorial Church, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1970.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

## Justiss, Jacob J., Jr. (1919–1978)

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### DOUGLAS MORGAN

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Jacob Justiss was an influential pastor, educator, and historian of black Adventism.

### Early Years

The fourth child and only son of Jacob and Beatrice Ann Price Justiss, Jacob was born May 2, 1919, in the east Texas town of Mount Pleasant. Shortly after his birth he contracted infantile paralysis but with hours-long daily rubdowns by his mother and two nurses, he recovered at 22 months, weakened by the disease but not crippled. By then the family had moved to Ohio—first Lima, then Toledo, where Jacob, Sr. was employed maintaining railroad car steam engines.<sup>1</sup>

During her high school years in Toledo, Jacob's oldest sister, Marie (1911-1991), left the Baptist church and was baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist. Then, his sister Valarie (1913-2015) also became an Adventist around 1931 while studying at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Back in Toledo, after his other sister, Juanita, began attending the Adventist church, their mother assigned 14-year-old Jacob to accompany her for protection. When Juanita became an Adventist in December 1933, her Baptist friends thought she had gone crazy. Three months later, in March 1934, Jacob, whose reading had convinced him of the truth of Adventist teachings, reportedly offered his hand to the Adventist pastor saying, "I think I'll go crazy too."<sup>2</sup>

## Pastor and Teacher

Jacob attended the University of Toledo for two years but then transferred to Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) in Berrien Springs, Michigan, to study for the ministry. He majored in religion with a minor in history, graduating with highest honors in 1942.

The creative energy, persistent innovation, and high premium on education that would become hallmarks of his career became evident during his first pastoral assignment in the Michigan Conference. He convinced the relatively small Inkster Church near Detroit to build a church school, but the funds ran out before the lights were installed. So Justiss taught himself electrical wiring and installed the lights himself. The insurance application was initially denied but Justiss ended up convincing the insurance company to provide the school with complimentary insurance for a year. Then, when the school opened with the church unable to pay a driver, he drove the school bus himself.<sup>3</sup>

Sponsored by the Michigan Conference, Justiss attended the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., earning an M.A. in 1945 with a thesis entitled "The Origin and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Health Work Among Negroes."<sup>4</sup> Jacob married Mae Elizabeth Smith in Washington, D.C. on September 1, 1946. They became the parents of two children, Joan Tynes and Jacob Justiss III.<sup>5</sup> Allegheny Conference, which began operation in 1945 as one of the denomination's first "colored" or regional conferences, called Justiss to join its ministerial ranks but ended up assigning him to teach history at Pine Forge Institute (later Academy), newly-established near Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Justiss was a member of the school's faculty for its first two years of operation (1946-1948). He then taught history at Oakwood College (now University) in Huntsville, Alabama, from 1948 to 1950. Returning to Washington, D.C. in 1950, he served as principal at

Washington Union Academy during its final year as a 12-grade high school operated jointly by the city's black Adventist churches.<sup>6</sup>

## Ministry in Ohio and Washington, D.C.

In 1951, Justiss returned to pastoral ministry, accepting the pastorate of the Ephesus Church in Columbus, Ohio. He was ordained at the Allegheny Conference camp meeting in July 1953<sup>7</sup> and later that year called to pastor one of the conferences largest congregations, and one of historic influence—the Ephesus Church in Washington, D.C. Well-received there, he became known as a “young people’s pastor,” in part for his manner—outgoing, down to earth, ready to laugh. He brought a new liveliness to worship services, with sermons that, according to his daughter, Joan Tynes, were “scholarly, vibrant, and short!”<sup>8</sup>

Justiss’s initiatives at Ephesus-D.C. included formation of a new social services division in the church in 1954 that was intended to mobilize the considerable professional expertise within the membership and coordinate the two departments that already held responsibility for some phases of social welfare—the Dorcas Society and the Deacon Board. His rationale was that “the very essence of religion is contained in the duties of social workers” and that the church has a “logical and indispensable part in any welfare work that it cannot justifiably hand over to any other agency.”<sup>9</sup> The new division was illustrative of Justiss’s efforts, along with those of his sister, Valarie Justice-Vance, a member of Ephesus-D.C. with a doctorate in Social Work, to move the church toward new and better ways of fulfilling the social dimension of its gospel mission.

## Building Dupont Park Church

The most prominent achievement of Justiss’s Washington, D.C. pastorate was in leading the fund-raising to meet a long-standing need for a new and larger house of worship. The need had been talked about for some time and became more apparent than ever in 1952 when the addition of a separate “junior church” service failed to alleviate overcrowding that sometimes forced would-be worshipers to return home.<sup>10</sup>

Raising the necessary funds presented a formidable obstacle, but Justiss met it with his skill at casting a vision and winning support for it. He was the pastor who “conceived, organized, and made possible” construction of a new colonial-style edifice overlooking Fort Dupont Park, on the Maryland border of Southeast Washington, D.C.

<sup>11</sup> He unified the congregation behind the project, won support from initially reluctant denominational officials, and convinced local bankers to extend credit liberally to Ephesus members, providing easy terms for repayment that made it possible for members of modest means to make sizable financial contributions.<sup>12</sup> The congregation, renamed Dupont Park Church, held its first worship service in the new sanctuary on April 18, 1959<sup>3</sup> and the facility continues to house worshipers and the Dupont Park Adventist School at the time of this writing.

## Conference Youth Leader

With completion of the Dupont Park church building in sight, the Allegheny Conference transferred Justiss in 1958 to the Cincinnati-Germantown district in Ohio. In 1961 he moved into a new role—director of the Young People’s Missionary Volunteer (MV) and Temperance departments of the Allegheny Conference. Again the innovator, Justiss organized two basketball leagues—Eastern States and Western States—under the auspices of the Allegheny Conference MV department.<sup>14</sup> Such leagues in time became a standard part of youth ministry in regional conferences.

## Angels in Ebony

In 1967, Justiss returned to the educational arena, teaching black history at Anacostia High School in Washington, D.C. and studying part-time for a doctor of ministry degree at Howard University, completed in 1976.<sup>15</sup>

In 1970 members of the Dupont Park Church and the Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland, which then had a predominantly white membership, collaborated in efforts to build interracial understanding and fellowship. Justiss was invited to teach a special class at Sligo titled “Black Experience in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”<sup>16</sup> He developed his lectures for that class into a book, *Angels in Ebony*, published in 1975.<sup>17</sup>

The book featured a conversational, anecdote-rich style appealing to readers who might be put off by a ponderous historical tome. Solidly grounded in the broader contexts of American and Adventist history, Justiss told the black Adventist story drawing heavily on his own experience as a participant-observer for nearly 40 years and conversations with key participants who had either experienced or received first-hand testimony regarding developments in earlier decades. As such, the book preserves an invaluable repository of information and insights that otherwise would likely have been lost.

## The Seventh-day Adventist Church of International Brotherhood

Justiss’s Sligo class, well-received and extended several weeks beyond its original schedule, had another and more immediate outcome. It inspired a group of participants with a desire to “do something significant in the field of human relations simply through its own behavior,” Justiss recalled. About 60 class members, mostly white, committed to establishing a fully integrated church. It was organized later in 1970 as the Seventh-day Adventist Church of International Brotherhood with Justiss as founding pastor. It met in rented facilities at Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, drawing an attendance of about 200 that Justiss estimated to be 60% black and 40% white and Asian.<sup>18</sup>

While he affirmed the separate regional or black conferences initiated in 1944 as an important advance step for the black Adventist cause, Justiss hoped that the Brotherhood Church would help prompt Adventism toward a higher ideal of full racial integration. On the basis of that principle, he opposed affiliating the new congregation

with either the regional conference (Allegheny East) or the white-administered Potomac Conference. "How can you say that in Christ Jesus all are one when you are not demonstrating it?" he asked.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the Brotherhood Church eventually connected with the Potomac Conference in 1972, with Roger Mace appointed pastor. Justiss remained part of the core leadership team until he died of a heart attack on April 23, 1978, at Washington Adventist Hospital. He was 58 years old.<sup>20</sup>

## Legacy

A memorial service for Justiss, who had been preceded in death by his wife, Mae Smith Justiss, was conducted April 27, 1978. Fittingly, it was held at the church Justiss was instrumental in building, Dupont Park Church, and presided over by prominent ministerial colleagues including E. E. Cleveland, C. D. Brooks, and N. C. Wilson.<sup>21</sup>

Jacob Justiss was both a visionary and an entrepreneurial activist. He left an indispensable witness to American Adventism's racial history and communicated it so as to inspire movement toward a more faithful embodiment of the gospel. By stepping beyond established lines to build schools and houses of worship, plant congregations, and initiate social welfare and youth ministry programs, he made history for that same purpose.

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