

Venden, Morris Leo (1932–2013)

DAN SHULTZ

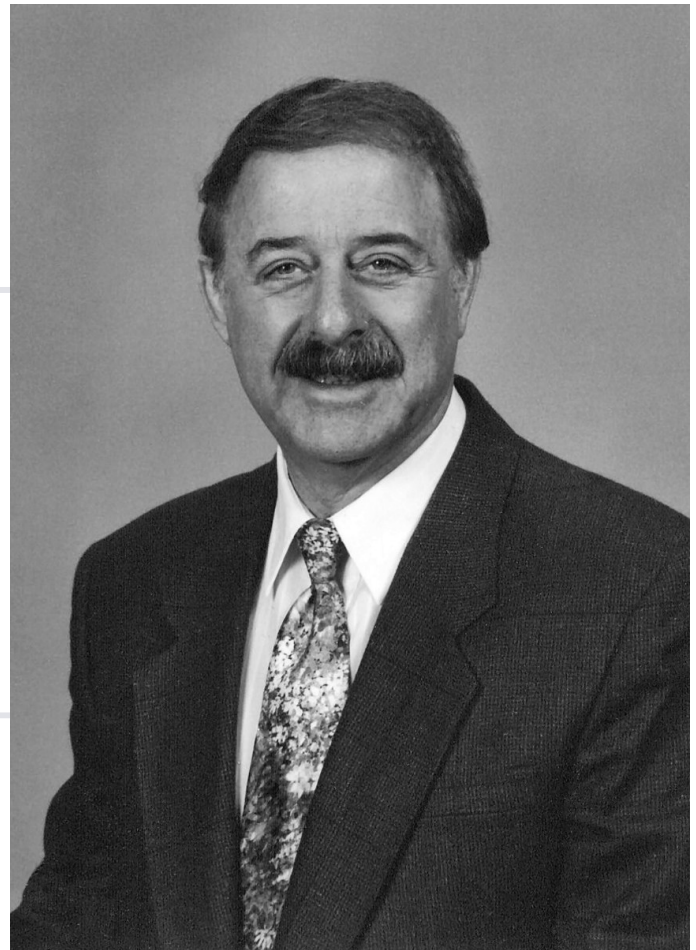
Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

Morris L. Venden, Adventist pastor, evangelist, and author, was widely-appreciated for skillful preaching that emphasized the centrality of a vital, personal relationship with Christ. He championed the message of salvation by faith in Christ alone, which he regarded as including justification, sanctification, and glorification.

The Venden Family Evangelistic Team

Born in Portland, Oregon, on April 5, 1932, Morris was the younger of the two sons of Melvin Louis and Ivy Ruth Venden.¹ From his earliest years, his family and that of his uncle, Daniel Venden, traveled as a singing and evangelistic team, conducting six-month campaigns in numerous cities throughout the United States. This nomadic experience began for the Venden family in 1930, the year Morris's older brother, Louis, was born.²

The traveling continued until the brothers were in their teenage years, ending temporarily in 1943 when Dan Venden became pastor of the College View church in Lincoln, Nebraska, and president of the Nebraska Conference the following year. Melvin and Dan Venden resumed their work as part-time evangelists in the late 1940s and then worked together full-time again from 1950 to 1955 in California, until Dan became president of the Central California Conference.³



Morris Venden

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Education, Marriage, and Early Ministry

During these years, Morris Venden graduated from Fresno Union Academy in 1949⁴ and then enrolled at La Sierra College (now La Sierra University) where his brother Louis also was a student. Both brothers were active in music, singing in the La Sierra College Collegians, a select choir directed by John T. Hamilton,⁵ and were leaders on campus. Louis Venden served as president of the senior class in 1950-51,⁶ and Morris Venden was president of the Associated Student Body in 1952-53.⁷

While at La Sierra College, Morris Venden met Marilyn L. Moore, and they married on May 2, 1954, at the time of his graduation.⁸ They would have a son, Lee, in 1955, and two daughters, Lynn in 1957, and LuAnn in 1967.

Both Morris Venden and his brother began pastoral ministry in California. In 1955, the Northern California Conference invited the brothers to serve with their father, Melvin, as pastors in Sacramento, each at a different church, and jointly as an evangelistic team in that city. Their father pastored the Central church, while Morris served the Oak Park church, and Louis, who had been working in Oakland, served the North Sacramento church.⁹ Louis had been ordained to the ministry in June earlier that year¹⁰ and Morris would later be ordained in June 1957, with his father participating in the service.¹¹

The brothers both pursued graduate study at Potomac University, the denominational theological seminary in Takoma Park, Maryland, and returned to California in 1958 to work together as an evangelistic team.¹² The following year, Louis, who had completed an Master of Arts degree at the seminary, accepted an overseas position to teach Bible at Japan Missionary College.¹³ During the next six years while Louis and his family were in Japan, Morris Venden pastored the Oak Park church (later known as the Gateway church) in Sacramento until 1959, when he accepted a position as a district leader in the Oregon Conference.¹⁴

Prominent Preacher

Three years later, Morris Venden became associate pastor at White Memorial church in Glendale, California,¹⁵ the first of several large churches at which he pastored. These included the Mountain View, California, church for three years¹⁶ followed by campus churches at four Adventist colleges: La Sierra College (1971-1974),¹⁷ Pacific Union College (1974-1981),¹⁸ Union College (1981-1986), and Southwestern Adventist College (now Southwestern Adventist University; 1986-1989). While there, the college awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1987.¹⁹

During these years, Venden was in much demand as a speaker for weeks of prayer, camp meetings, conferences, and retreats, both in the United States and abroad. His use of humor, down-to earth approach, and modern-day parables contributed to his appeal as one of the denomination's best-known and most influential preachers.

In 1989, Venden returned to California where he pastored the Azure Hills church near Loma Linda until 1998. During those years, the congregation grew to the largest membership in its history, requiring three worship services each Sabbath.²⁰ When he retired from full-time pastoral ministry in 1998, Venden joined the Voice of Prophecy radio program as an associate speaker. He also continued to be a popular speaker at large convocations such as the World Ministry Council held at the 2000 General Conference session in Toronto.²¹

Prolific Author

Venden's first book, *Salvation by Faith and Your Will*, was published in 1978 while he was pastor of the Pacific Union College church and teaching at the college. He continued to write, penning over forty books about salvation, grace, faith, and how a trusting relationship with Christ is central to having a rewarding and successful Christian life. The following from a 1982 article in the *Australasian Record* conveys the heart of his message:

The Bible does not teach that salvation is by grace alone—it is always by grace through faith. Faith on the part of the sinner is essential. However, faith involves more than simple mental assent, or belief. Saving faith insists on trust. And trust involves two parties, one trusting the other. When the sinner trusts Jesus for salvation by faith there is more than a legal declaration in heaven. There is the beginning of a relationship with God, followed by ethical results and expectations.²²

Many of Venden's books began as sermon manuscripts or transcriptions, and thus the same traits that drew overflow crowds whenever he spoke helped make his books Adventist best-sellers. While some of his book titles, such as *Love God and Do as You Please*, *Hard to be Lost*, *It's Who You Know*, and *God Says, But I Think*, made some church members uneasy, they were designed to arouse interest. His best-selling book was *Faith That Works*.²³

Major books included a three-volume series on doctrines of the church published by Pacific Press in 1985. *Foundations for Faith. Common Ground* discussed doctrines shared with all Christians; *Higher Ground*, doctrines shared with other conservative Christians; and *Uncommon Ground*, doctrines unique to the Adventist faith. A 384-page distillation of his thinking, *95 Theses on Righteousness by Faith*, was published in May 1986.

The Brothers Venden

Through the years, Morris and his brother Louis appeared together on several occasions. In 1977, for example, they spoke about "Salvation by Faith" at the North Dakota camp meeting.²⁴ Two years later they conducted a week of prayer for the theological seminary at Andrews University;²⁵ and in 1980 they both spoke for the religious meetings at the Southern Union Conference Medical-Dental Congress in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.²⁶

In 1982, Morris Venden was the featured speaker at a birthday celebration for H. M. S. Richards, where Louis Venden was master of ceremonies. Both brothers acknowledged the important role Richards had played in their lives.²⁷

Contribution

Morris Venden was living in Walla Walla, Washington, when he died on February 10, 2013, at age 80, after a decade-long struggle with Frontotemporal Dementia (FTD), also known as Pick's Disease, a rare form of dementia.²⁸

Lee Venden, an Adventist minister and revivalist who had a close relationship with his father, observed at the time of his father's death, "Dad will be remembered for the one string on his violin that he consistently talked about, Jesus, and the privilege available to everyone to have a meaningful friendship with Him. At this point it seems clear that Dad will sleep this disease off, the long sleep from our perspective; the short sleep from his."²⁹

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