

Doss, Norman Laverne (1924–2015)

GORDEN R. DOSS, AND ALLAN DANNIE VYSON MOYO

Gorden R. Doss was born in the United States and grew up in Malawi. He married Cheryl Brown and they served in Malawi for 16 years, where their two children were born. He earned a Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. Doss has taught world missions at the Theological Seminary, Andrews University since 1998.

Allan Dannie Vyson Moyo, B.A. (Malawi Adventist University, Malawi, an affiliate of the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya), currently serves as a pastor in North Malawi Conference. Moyo also serves as an endorsed chaplain for Mzuzu University, and Mzuzu Central Hospital in North Malawi. He has served the church for 32 years in various pastoral and departmental portfolios. He is married to Betty Funani Moyo and they have three children and one grandchild.



Norman Doss, c. 1960.

Photo courtesy of Gorden R. Doss.

Norman Doss, was a U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine medic in the Second World War, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, a missionary to Africa, and a

church administrator. Florence Doss was the daughter of pastoral and missionary parents, a registered nurse, office secretary, and partner in ministry with Norman.¹

Early Lives (1923-1941)

Norman Lavern Doss was born May 31, 1924, in Omaha, Nebraska to Rea and Margaret (Jordan) Doss. He grew up in Denver, Colorado, where he attended Adventist church schools. Rea and Margaret were charter members and lay leaders of South Denver Adventist Church and Margaret was a nurse at Porter Adventist Sanitarium. Many Adventists ask if Norman was related to Desmond T. Doss, the decorated medic of the Second World War, whose life is featured in the movie "Hacksaw Ridge." Norman and Desmond were sixth cousins through their common ancestors, Thomas, Sr. (1686-1759) and Sara Doss.² They met on occasion and were brothers in spirit.

Florence Theresa Oss was born June 24, 1923 in Winner, South Dakota to Gorden and Alpha (Faul) Oss. Her father was president of the South Dakota Conference when the family was called to Trinidad in 1934, where he became president of the South Caribbean Conference. The family returned to the U.S.A. in 1939, where Gorden became pastor of the Flint, Michigan church. Florence and her sister, Myrtle, were orphaned soon thereafter when both parents died in a traffic accident. Florence went on to study at Atlantic Union College, Loma Linda School of Nursing, and Union College.

Career in the U.S. Navy (1941-1947)

Knowing he would be drafted in the looming war, Norman enlisted in the U. S. Navy in 1941, at age 17. He was trained as a field medic and a dental technician. His wartime experience included the battles of Roi-Namur, Saipan, Tinian, and Iwo Jima islands, where he provided medical supplies to field medics and transported casualties to hospital ships. His life was spared in many dramatic ways. His faith had slipped and he had abandoned the Adventist lifestyle but his close calls with death shook him. Just prior to the invasion of Iwo Jima he was on the island of Maui. One Sabbath he took the bus to the beach and spent the day alone reading the Bible, singing, and praying. The spiritual experience of that day was pivotal for him. Soon thereafter, he attended church and took communion for the first time in several years. Visiting the Adventist mission office, he met Pastor Elmer Waldy, who became a good friend. Waldy prayed a special prayer for his protection that he always remembered. The battle of Iwo Jima was one of the harshest of the Pacific war but he had peace in his heart during its horrors. When he reached the island, he gave his weapon to a fellow Marine who had lost his own. Thereafter, he carried no weapons in keeping with the non-combatant Adventist tradition in which he was raised. In later life, he always expressed deep sorrow for the multitudes of Japanese who lost their lives. When the war ended in 1945, he volunteered for two more years in the Navy and was posted to China. Working as a dental technician in Shanghai and Tientsin, he met Adventist missionaries, as well as local believers, and developed an interest in missionary service.

Marriage and Early Ministry (1947-1954)

In 1947 Norman was discharged from the Navy with three goals in mind—become a pastor, marry a good woman, and serve as a missionary. He enrolled at Union College, in Lincoln, Nebraska. There he met Florence Oss and they married in 1949, soon after her graduation. When Norman graduated in 1951, he started as a pastor in the North Dakota Conference. While attending camp meeting in 1954, the Dosses were approached by Paul Bradley, General Conference associate secretary, who invited them to go to the Malawi⁸ Union⁴ as missionaries.⁵ The couple, with their son Gorden, sailed from New York City aboard the Robin Tuxford bound for Cape Town on November 16. They arrived in Malawi by train from Cape Town on Christmas Day.

Service in Malawi (1954-1970)

The Malawi Union was administered at the time through mission stations, instead of fields/conferences. Norman was director of Thekerani and Chinyama Missions. Thekerani was the larger of the two and was located about 23 miles (37 km) from Malamulo Mission, the “mother mission” of Adventists in Malawi. His initial work included supervising 60 schools, 77 teachers, and 8 pastors.⁶ The number of schools later decreased when the Southern African Division voted to relinquish government education subsidies because of church-state relationship concerns. As the loss of government funding approached, he supervised the hurried construction of 30 school buildings, hauling many of the supplies in his pickup. Although untrained in accounting, he kept the financial records and paid salaries for 85 regular employees plus day laborers without the benefit of an adding machine. James Nkoka was pastor of the Thekerani Mission church. Future Malawi Union president, F. A. Botomani, was among the pastors.

Florence Doss’s nursing skills were in demand from the first day at Thekerani. In the first ten months she treated 6,000 patients in the back yard of the mission house. Thereafter, a medical assistant was hired to operate a clinic which she supervised. Norman took serious patients to Malamulo Hospital when he was at home and the narrow, muddy roads permitted. Florence had many harrowing experiences working to save lives in difficult maternity cases that could not be taken to the hospital. Thekerani was in an area where tropical diseases were common and she treated malaria, bilharzia, tropical ulcers, intestinal worms, scabies, ring worm, and many other maladies. The Dosses, themselves, had frequent bouts of malaria. In spite of the challenges at Thekerani, the family found deep satisfaction in their life and work and were sad to leave.

In 1958 the Malawi Union was reorganized into two fields. South Nyasa Field was headquartered in Blantyre and North Nyasa Field in Mzimba, with Doss as president and S. M. Samuel Tchawani as secretary treasurer. N. Y. Kasambara, F. K. Nyasulu, and J. H. Mambala were departmental leaders. Florence Doss became her husband’s office secretary. The church appropriated funds for an office building, staff houses, and a church building. Temporary buildings were used for a year until the houses and office near the government Boma were ready. The move to Mzimba was good for the health of the family as malaria was less common in its cooler climate.

The late-1950s and early-1960s were politically tense as Nyasaland moved away from a British colonial government toward becoming the independent nation of Malawi in 1964. Part of Norman’s administrative challenge was navigating the troubled times on behalf of the church. He developed friendships with Paramount Chief Mbelwa, Chief Mtwalo, Chief Sibande and others. These and other friendships helped smooth the waters of difficult times. On one occasion, when the British civil servants in Mzimba were very fearful, a local chief sent a message of reassurance that the Dosses had nothing to fear because of their good relationships with the local people. The Dosses discovered local churches using a hymnal in the Chitumbuka language of northern Malawi, with hymns written by local musicians. One hymn, *Hena Mwana wa Mbelere* (Behold the Lamb), became a family favorite.

In 1963 Norman Doss was called to replace A. W. Austin as president of the Malawi Union, with W. M. Webster as secretary-treasurer. Once again, Florence was her husband's office secretary. When Malawi became independent a year later, Norman developed a friendship with the new president of Malawi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, with whom he transacted routine church business.

During his seven years in office, Doss led in several significant developments. The printing press at Malamulo was accredited by the General Conference as the Malamulo Publishing House. An aircraft was purchased for use by Dr. Jack Harvey, the "flying doctor," based at Malamulo Hospital. Norman actively worked to expand the network of landing strips used for monthly doctor's visits. Dr. Ben Nelson was called to be the first missionary dentist in Adventist healthcare in Africa. A ministerial school was opened at Lunjika Mission with Perry Parks as principal. A third field, the Central Nyasa Field, was organized and located in Dedza. The Falls Church in Lilongwe was built to significantly expand church work in that growing urban center, now the nation's capital. These projects and many church building projects were funded by personal contacts in America. For her part, Florence was known for visiting pastoral wives in their homes, sitting by their cooking fires, and entertaining people in her own home. "Norman Doss was regarded by Malawians as a loving, sociable, humble, and enthusiastic administrator. He frequently visited pastors to encourage them and impart a spirit of dedication in their assigned places."⁷

During the years the Dosses were in Malawi, the membership grew, by the power of God and the dedication of the church, from 14,445 to 29,139.⁸ They always looked back on those 15 years as some of their best, with the three years at Thekerani Mission as providing especially cherished memories. Although they felt that moving back to U.S.A. was appropriate, the departure was a wrenching experience, given their personal relationships and commitments in Malawi.

Later Ministry (1970-1989)

In 1970 the Doss family returned to the U.S.A.,⁹ to serve the Eighteenth Street Church, of Kansas City, Kansas.¹⁰ Norman valued the opportunity to return to the bedrock of ministry at the local church. The old church building needed to be replaced and he led the congregation in constructing the Chapel Oaks Church building in a new location. Florence returned to nursing profession in Kansas City.

In 1974 the General Conference called Norman to the Lay Activities and Sabbath School Department of the Trans-Africa Division in Harare, Zimbabwe.¹¹ Florence worked as an office secretary in Treasury. Norman's work required extensive travel to far flung churches, workers' meetings, and camp meetings. For a few months he served as interim president of the Burundi Union Mission. The Rhodesian war was intense at the time and travel in Zimbabwe was in military convoy. One bonus was that their children, Gorden and Cheryl Doss, were back in Malawi, making occasional family visits possible.

In 1980 the Dosses moved back to the U.S.A., where Norman became an associate in the General Conference Personal Ministries department assigned to the North American Division. Florence was an office secretary in the Secretariat, caring for missionaries assigned to the Far Eastern Division.

In 1982, Doss was called to be secretary of the Carolina Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Malcolm Gordon was president. Another call came in 1986 to be president of the New York Conference, in Syracuse, New York. In both Carolina and New York Conferences Florence travelled and worked alongside her husband.

As they approached retirement, the Dosses looked for relief from the busy life of church administration and accepted a call in 1988 to pastor the Angwin Village Church, in the Northern California Conference.

Retirement Years

Upon retiring in 1989, they settled in Calistoga, California and joined the Calistoga church, where they both served in various local church offices. Norman became chair of the Adventist retirees fellowship in the area. They continued to actively support the Malawi Union through their son who was principal of Lakeview Seminary, making two visits to Malawi, and raising funds for building projects. In 1999 they attended the Union College home coming to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Norman's graduation.

In 2002 they moved to Berrien Springs, Michigan, to be near their son. Florence Doss died on October 16, 2012, at the age of 89, while Norman Doss went to his rest on January 15, 2015 at age 90. Both await the resurrection at Rose Hill Cemetery in Berrien Springs.

Contribution and Legacy

Malawi is probably the single place where the Dosses left their most enduring legacy. Their personal gifts and abilities seemed like a natural fit for the people and times of Malawi during the 15 years there. On another scale, their legacy is seen in the commitment to Adventist world mission they bequeathed to their family. Their son and daughter-in-law, Cheryl (Brown) Doss, served for 16 years in Malawi and later became professors of world mission, while their two grandchildren have served in several African countries and in the Philippines.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Unless noted otherwise, information in this article is from memories of Gorden Doss, son of Norman and Florence Doss, and notes taken when his parents were alive.
2. Ancestry research by Norman's grandson, Richard Doss.
3. Before independence in 1964, the nation was called Nyasaland.
4. The current name, Malawi Union, is used in this article. It was called South East Africa Union and Nyasaland Union in other times. The Malawi Union now includes only the nation of Malawi but in past times in included parts of Zambia and Mozambique.
5. [adventistarchives.org/Minutes/General Conference Committee, Tenth Meeting](http://adventistarchives.org/Minutes/General%20Conference%20Committee,%20Tenth%20Meeting). "Voted, to request the Northern Union and North Dakota Conference to release N. L. Doss, and invite him to connect with the Southeast African Union Mission as director of the Thekerani Mission Station, August, 1954."
6. Specific details come from his diaries and interviews with his son Gorden. Some general details come from Gorden's memories.
7. Statement by Allan Moyo.
8. General Conference Annual Statistical reports for 1955 and 1971.
9. Southeast Africa Union of Seventh-day Adventists (Blantyre, Malawi) Minutes of the Southeast Africa Union Committee held on January 29, 1970. "Voted, Permanent return of Norman L. Doss from Southeast Africa Union authorized."

10. Kansas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Kansa City, Kansas) Minutes of the Kansas Conference Committee held in February 1970.

"Voted, to pass on to Norman L. Doss, permanently returned from the Trans-Africa Division, a call from the Central Union Conference to connect with the Kansas Conference as Pastor of the Kansas City, Kansas District, February, 1970."

11. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Takoma Park, MD), Minutes of the General Conference Committee, held in 1974. "Norman L.

Doss, elected Lay Activities, Sabbath School department Secretary for Trans – Africa Division; G. E. Knowles introduced Norman Doss, director of the Lay Activities and Sabbath School Departments of the Trans-Africa Division, June 8, 1978.

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