

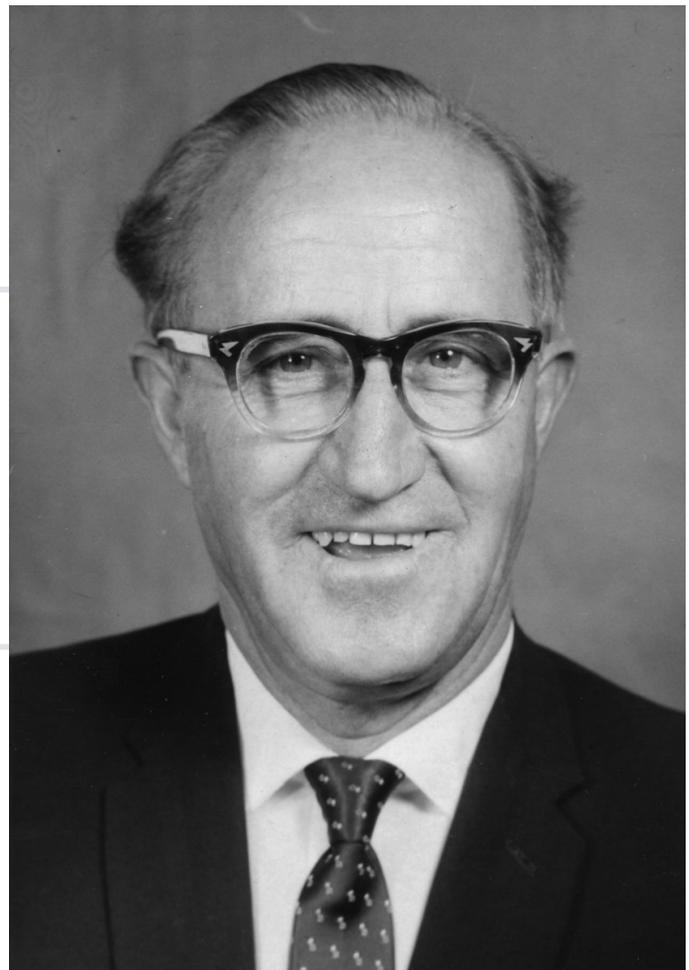
Sibley, David

(1900–1973)

GILBERT M. VALENTINE

Gilbert M. Valentine, Ph.D. has served internationally in teaching and senior administrative roles in Adventist higher education in Europe, Asia, the South Pacific and North America. He has written extensively in Adventist studies and has authored several books, including biographies of *W. W. Prescott* (2005) and *J. N. Andrews* (2019). *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) explored the political influence of Ellen White. He has also written for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013).

David Sibley gave 41 years of service as an evangelist and deeply respected administrator for the church in the South Pacific. For ten years he was a successful evangelist in both small-town and big-city settings in South New Zealand, Tasmania and Victoria before being called into conference leadership in Tasmania. During a period of 23 years he served as president of three local conferences and concluded his ministry with eight years as union conference president.



David Sibley

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

Family Background and Education (1900–1925)

The fifth of 13 siblings, David Sibley was born on March 5, 1900, to Henry Sibley and Annie Marie Sibley (née Grose) at Broken Hill, NSW. Sibley's British and Irish forebears had migrated to South Australia in the 1870s and had settled near Kadina on the Yorke Peninsular of South Australia, where they found employment in the large Wallaroo copper mine. Henry and Annie had married on October 26, 1889, in the Wallaroo home of Annie's parents, William and Eliza Grose.¹ With the Wallaroo mine struggling to recover after a slump in world copper prices in the late 1880s, Henry and Annie, shortly after the birth of their first child, Phyllis, in 1890, moved to the outback town of Broken Hill in New South Wales in search of new mining work at the recently opened lead and silver mine. Broken Hill had been the family home for a decade when David was born.

In 1904, when Sibley was four years old, a colporteur sold his mother *The Great Controversy*, and she became interested in Adventist teachings.² It was not until 12 or 13 years later, however, when Robert Hare and Albert

Smart conducted evangelistic meetings in Broken Hill, that his mother and a number of David's siblings became members of the local Adventist Church. He apparently attended and enjoyed the sermons of his local pastor, Albert Smart, but took some time to make his own commitment. Two of his older siblings, Phyllis and Joseph, took up colporteur work in South Australia. Most of the other siblings in the large family remained lifelong Adventists.

Upon the completion of his schooling in the town's elementary and secondary schools, David Sibley took up an apprenticeship to become qualified as a blacksmith, and this became his trade. Shortly after his 58-year-old father, Henry, died in December 1921, David became more concerned about spiritual matters. David, who was gifted with a rich baritone voice, often sang in the Methodist choir, and through this involvement had become acquainted with Lillian Howarth, a Methodist young woman of British ancestry who was actively involved in her congregation, playing the organ and singing. Later while helping his mother deliver *Signs of the Times* around the town, David encountered Lillian again at her home, and she became interested in the Sabbath doctrine and before long made a commitment to Sabbathkeeping even before the young man who had given her the literature.³ Mutual interest in music and in the Sabbath soon drew the two closer together. They were baptized together by W. H. Pascoe in Broken Hill in September 1922. After attending a camp meeting, they both for a time became colporteurs setting out to earn tuition fees to help them attend the Australian Missionary College (AMC) in Cooranbong. In 1923 Sibley enrolled in AMC to undertake the ministerial course. During vacations he sold Adventist literature in Broken Hill and through the rural towns along the Lachlan River in outback New South Wales, spending approximately nine months in all in literature evangelism. Lillian enrolled at AMC in 1924 and then went on to undertake the nursing course at the Sydney Sanitarium.⁴

Sibley was called into evangelistic work in South New Zealand in September 1925 interrupting his studies. He did not get to complete the AMC ministerial course. Eighteen months later, on December 9, 1926, following the completion of Lillian's nursing course, the couple was married in Christchurch.

Evangelism (1925–1944)

At first Sibley joined evangelist J. W. Kent in a team ministry conducting annual campaigns in small-town South New Zealand. Sibley provided a musical ministry and often conducted mission choirs. During the succeeding ten years he became an experienced and successful evangelist in his own right with his own small team. After his marriage to Lillian the couple's musical ministry enriched many evangelistic meetings. Besides being a talented pianist, Lillian possessed a warm mezzo-soprano voice that blended beautifully with that of her baritone husband and according to Marye Trim, the couple sang "countless duets."⁵ The family grew with the addition of two sons, Calvin (born in Dunedin) and Milton (born in Christchurch). Sibley was ordained to gospel ministry at a camp meeting in Oamaru on January 14, 1930.⁶

In March 1935 Sibley and his family transferred to the Tasmanian Conference for evangelistic work and 18 months later moved to Victoria. Here for the next seven years Sibley sometimes joined large campaigns, such as those run by J. B. Conley in Melbourne, and at other times ran evangelistic campaigns on his own in country towns and in the suburbs of the state capital. In 1943 he led an evangelistic team of four full-time workers in Melbourne.⁷ During the years of the World War II Sibley successfully utilized radio to broaden his evangelistic audience in Victoria through a new initiative known as the Advent Radio Church, and he was soon joined by other Adventist evangelists in the endeavor.⁸

Conference Administrator (1945–1966)

At the end of 1944 Sibley was appointed to the presidency of the Tasmanian Conference, and two years later, in early 1947, he responded to a call to the presidency of the North New South Wales Conference, where he was reelected four times, to serve for a total of nine years. This time in New South Wales was followed by service as president of the South Queensland Conference for two two-year terms. In 1959 Sibley was appointed to the presidency of the Trans-Tasman Union Conference, overseeing the work of the church in two New Zealand conferences and the four conferences of the northeastern states of Australia.

According to fellow church leader Robert Frame, Sibley was a much-loved and deeply respected administrative leader. He had a “keen mind” and was an astute Bible student. He was also endowed with a distinctive oratorical gift, and few, according to Frame, could match his ability to “express themselves in such descriptive language.” His personal warmth, enriched by “a ready wit and strong sense of humor,” endeared him to both his workers and his conference constituency, and he took a special pleasure in helping young workers “on the road to success.” For example, Desmond Ford, who as a young evangelistic intern at Inverell, in North New South Wales, working under Sibley, later recalled him as very supportive of young, inexperienced workers. Later again, when teaching at Avondale in the territory of Sibley’s conference, Ford found Sibley to be a valued mentor, and understanding of the complexities and problems of Adventist doctrinal distinctives.⁹ In Ford’s view Sibley was “a prince among us.”¹⁰ The musical gifts Sibley and his wife, Lillian, shared also did much to win the hearts of his constituents and friends. In 1954 he and Lillian sang together at the General Conference session at San Francisco, and during their ministry they were involved in assisting with and sometimes organizing and leading cantatas and other musical special events.¹¹ In Frame’s assessment, Sibley’s endearing personality and leadership qualities were “unique in denominational circles.”¹²

Retirement and Legacy

Sibley spent his retirement years in Wahroonga, Sydney, where he continued to be engaged in preaching and in church visitation. He died on May 20, 1973, at the Sydney Adventist Hospital and was buried at the Avondale Memorial Cemetery at Avondale. He is remembered for his commitment to evangelism and especially his

nurture and support of young workers through 41 years of service to the Adventist Church in the South Pacific.

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NOTES

1. "Australia Marriage Index: 1788–1950," [https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-](https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?dbid=1780&h=5397099&indiv=try&o_vc=Record:OtherRecord&rhSource=1778)

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2. S. C. Butler, "Annie Sibley obituary," *Australasian Record*, February 19, 1945, 7.

3. Robert R. Frame, "Life Sketch of Pastor David Sibley," *Australasian Record*, July 9, 1973, 1.

4. Marye Trim, "A Tribute to the Late Mrs. Lillian Sibley," *Australasian Record*, July 7, 1984, 13.

5. Ibid.

6. David Sibley Biographical Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives (Folder: "Sibley, David"; Documents: "Biographical Information Blanks 1927, 1946, 1950").

7. H. E. Piper, "Notes from Victoria," *Australasian Record*, September 13, 1943, 5.
8. Frame; H. J. Halliday, "Advent Radio Church in Victoria," *Ministry*, April 1944, 11, 12.
9. Sibley was acquainted with the case of William Warde Fletcher and felt that some of the concerns he raised about the exegesis of Hebrews warranted further study; "Trevor Lloyd interview with Desmond Ford," March 24, 1995, 8, held in the personal collection of the author.
10. Trim, 13.
11. Ibid.
12. Frame, 3.

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