

# Warren, Luther

## Willis (1864–1940)

BRIAN E. STRAYER

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Luther Willis Warren, evangelist and youth ministries innovator, influenced the lives of thousands of young people in schools and churches where he conducted revivals. He created organizations such as the Sunshine Bands, Junior and Senior Missionary Volunteer societies, church schools, and orphanages.

### Early Life

Luther Willis Warren was born on September 15, 1864, in Disco, Macomb County, Michigan. Luther's parents, Doran and Ellen Warren, became Seventh-day Adventists after attending meetings held by J. N. Loughborough (1832-1924). While Luther was an infant, Ellen dedicated him to God. One of Luther's brothers and his twin sister died in infancy; another brother, Walter, was killed by a cousin in their home. These tragedies made Luther a sensitive lad who developed an unusual tenderness for children. He helped his mother rear his younger sister Lilla and even tried to adopt a child of his own at sixteen.

### A Christian Boys' Club

As a boy, Luther was a voracious reader, a top speller, and a great nature lover who sang as he worked in his parents' garden. He early embraced the health reform message and throughout his life was a strict vegetarian. Known for his playfulness, humor, and knack for playing practical jokes, Luther was serious about spiritual matters.



Belle Proctor and Luther Warren.

Credit: Center for Adventist Research.

In 1879 Warren, then fourteen, and Harry Fenner, seventeen, formed a Christian Boys' Club (similar to the Christian Endeavor societies in America) with nine Adventist boys. They met once a week in the attic of the Meseraull home in Hazelton (now Juddville), Michigan, to pray, sing, run errands, mail tracts, and write encouraging letters. They next formed a temperance club and each boy signed the teetotal pledge to avoid alcohol, tea, coffee, tobacco, pork, and swearing. When six girls joined, they met in home parlors, and activities included parties, games, taffy-pulls, picnics, sleigh rides, swimming, and maple sugaring.

While a teenager, Luther preached his first sermon in L. D. Avery-Stuttle's parlor. In 1882 when Luther was eighteen, the members of the Hazelton Church elected him Sabbath school superintendent.

## Education and Marriage

Eugene Farnsworth persuaded Luther to attend Battle Creek College in 1882. The Warrens sold a cow and an aunt sold her gold watch to pay his expenses. During 1882-1883 Luther studied Spanish, Hebrew, and theology while working at Battle Creek Sanitarium and in the Haskell Home for Orphans. Due to illness in the family, he remained only one year at college, but when his schedule permitted, he later attended classes at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

A failure at canvassing, Warren succeeded at public evangelism. In 1888, while working as tent master at J. F. Ballenger's meetings in Benton Harbor, Michigan, Luther met Jessie Belle Proctor (1865-1960), Ballenger's Bible worker and organist. They were married at the 1839 Courthouse in Berrien Springs in 1889. They had one son (who died at three months) and a daughter, Rose (Warren) Guald. The Warrens worked for several years in Michigan; between 1889 and 1891 they established Adventist churches at Frankfort and Bear Lake. In 1891 they joined the New York Conference.

## Early Career as a Revivalist

In June 1892, Luther Warren was ordained to the gospel ministry at the Cortland, New York camp meeting by R. A. Underwood, president of the Atlantic Union Conference, and Sands Lane, president of the New York Conference. He was also elected president of the Sabbath School Association for the New York Conference.

While most Adventist ministers of that era preferred pastoral ministry or public evangelism, Warren became known as a revivalist and youth worker. Tall, austere, gracious, and eloquent, he was soon in demand as a public speaker across the United States. During the 1890s he and Goodloe Harper Bell fostered the development of church schools. Their efforts contributed to an increase in the number of schools from seven in 1890 to 594 by 1910. In addition, Luther and Belle established several orphanages for Adventist children.

## Sunshine Bands Organized

On June 11, 1894, in Alexandria, North Dakota, Warren formed the first Sunshine Band to visit the sick and shut-ins and to distribute Adventist literature.<sup>1</sup> By 1896 these bands had spread throughout the state, and soon after the turn of the century, nearly every Adventist church in America had a Sunshine Band. These Bands took as their password, "Not I [but Christ]"; as their motto, "Do all to the glory of God"; and as their aim, "Do something for somebody every day." Fittingly, Warren's favorite hymn was "There Is Sunlight on the Hilltop."

While working as a chaplain in the Workingman's Home in Chicago, Warren edited both the *Sunshine Magazine* and *The Life Boat* newsletter, and with his sister Lilla, started the first Bible Training School in Chicago to teach young adults how to give Bible studies and home nursing treatments. Warren also served as the president of the Tract and Missionary Society for the metropolitan area. During the late 1890s, Luther taught ministerial students at Battle Creek College; he and Belle also established the Medical Missionary Training School for Nurses in Chicago.

## Missionary Volunteer Societies Established

In a joint ministry that lasted half a century, Luther and Belle Warren labored in Michigan, Illinois, New York, Nebraska, California, Oregon, Washington and abroad in British Columbia, Mexico, and Jamaica. They established an orphanage in Paterson, New Jersey; taught 45 pupils at a church school in Council Bluffs, Iowa; and went to Jamaica to hold evangelistic meetings and train pastors in youth ministry.

At the 1901 General Conference, Luther helped establish the Young People's Missionary Volunteer Society, which at first became a part of the Sabbath School Department directed by L. Flora Plummer (1862-1945). Two years later Plummer invited Warren to join the Department to direct the M.V. work. In the next few years he established 186 Missionary Volunteer societies with over 3500 members. At the Mt. Vernon, Ohio, MV Convention (July 10-20, 1907), Warren succeeded in creating the Missionary Volunteer Society as a separate department of the General Conference with Milton Earl Kern (1875-1961) as director. Luther Warren also created the Junior M.V. societies, Progressive Classwork, the Morning Watch devotional, the M.V. reading classes, and the Standard of Attainment courses in Adventist doctrines and history.

## Youth-oriented Ministry

A public speaker of great power, Luther was known as "the cyclone preacher." His "sonorous voice, over-towering personality, and lucid presentations of the saving grace of Christ"<sup>2</sup> (especially in his emotional sermon about the final judgment titled "Court Week in Heaven"), exerted a powerful influence on Adventist youth for two generations. He baptized thousands of youth and mailed handwritten letters to thousands more; at one point his diary indicated that he owed 250 letters. His letters typically expressed joy at having a part in spreading the Adventist message and assured the recipient that he was concerned for their salvation and was praying for them. A man blessed with a phenomenal memory, near the end of his life Luther proved to his sister Lilla that

he could recall the first and last names of 1000 young people who had become his friends at camp meetings and M.V. conventions.

Unlike other evangelists, Warren refused to allow his photograph to be used in newspaper advertising, preferring that people see Christ through his messages rather than focusing on him. During his fifty-year ministry, he wrote five short articles in the *Review and Herald*. These emphasized faith, obedience, love for the truth, the sacredness of the Adventist message, and the need to praise God for His many blessings. In 1902 when Luther was discouraged at prospects in New York City, Ellen White encouraged him to go to God in faith and to seek physical relief in the country during the summer.<sup>3</sup>

## Later Life

In 1908 Luther and Belle Warren moved to Loma Linda, California, where Luther taught religion classes at the College of Medical Evangelists (now Loma Linda University) and established a Bible Training School in Los Angeles. Ellen White sent him a letter urging him not to overwork and become harsh toward his family and co-workers. Then she commended him for his revival efforts and assured him that angels would work with him and that she was praying for him.<sup>4</sup>

Although suffering from arthritis, cardiac asthma, and other illnesses in the 1920s, Luther continued preaching at camp meetings in the western United States, Canada, and Mexico. His sermons, which he was sometimes forced to deliver sitting down, focused on child rearing and the Spirit of Prophecy. Luther Willis Warren died at home in Loma Linda on May 24, 1940, at age 75 with Belle by his side. Following his funeral four days later in John Burden Hall at the College of Medical Evangelists, he was buried in Montecito Cemetery in Loma Linda. Belle Warren, who lived another twenty years and died on July 19, 1960 at age 95, was buried beside him.

## Contribution

Luther Willis Warren's greatest contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist Church was in creating organizations such as the Sunshine Bands, Junior and Senior Missionary Volunteer societies, church schools, and orphanages that ministered to the physical, social, and spiritual needs of the Church's children and youth. Warren was the first "youth pastor" decades before that title was created.

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## NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (1996), s.v. "Sunshine Bands."
2. "Luther Warren obituary," *ARH*, June 27, 1940, 23.
3. Ellen G. White to Luther Warren, July 8, 1902, Letter 104, 1902, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University [CAR].
4. Ellen G. White to Luther Warren, August 22, 1908, Letter 260, 1908, CAR.

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