

Dudley, Charles Edward, Sr. (1927–2010)

CALVIN B. ROCK

Calvin B. Rock has served the Seventh-day Adventist church for more than six decades as pastor-evangelist, administrator, scholar and author. He has given leadership as president of Oakwood University (1971-1985) and as a general vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1985-2002). He holds a D.Min. and a Ph.D. in religious ethics, both from Vanderbilt University. The most recently published of the several books he has authored is *Protest and Progress: Black Seventh-day Adventist Leadership and the Push for Parity* (2018).



Charles E. Dudley

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

Charles Edward Dudley, Sr. minister and conference president, was one of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's leading advocates for racial justice and structural change during the second half of the twentieth century.

Charles Dudley was born February 1, 1927, in South Bend, Indiana. Dudley's grandparents were among the original sixteen freed slaves who established the Thomas Chapel Methodist Episcopal church in Hickman, Kentucky. His parents, Joseph and Julia Dudley, moved from Kentucky to South Bend, Indiana, at the end of World War 1. Their home was blessed with seven children, the youngest of whom was Charles Dudley. His education through grade eleven, with one brief exception, was provided by the public schools in South Bend. He transferred to Oakwood Academy in Huntsville, Alabama, where he graduated from grade twelve in 1944. He earned a Bachelor of Ministry degree at Oakwood College from which he graduated in 1947. He married Etta Mae Maycock, a former college school mate on December 28, 1947. This union produced three children, Bonita, Charles II, and Albert.¹

The first nineteen years of Dudley's service with the Seventh-day Adventist Church involved pastoral ministry, which began immediately after graduation from Oakwood. He ministered in cities in the states of Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. In 1962, he became the president of the South Central Conference, one of the eight conferences of the Southern Union Conference. His tenure there lasted for a record thirty-one years, ending with his retirement in 1993.²

One of the nine regional conferences in the North American Division (NAD), the South Central Conference cares for the missional needs of African American communities in the states of Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and the northeast section of Arkansas. Highlights of Dudley's lengthy tenure in this field include membership growth from 4,300 to 23,000, the addition of approximately 100 new church and school structures, and the acquisition of government support for the construction of federally subsidized housing complexes for senior citizens in the cities of Bowling Green and Paducah, Kentucky; Nashville and Clarksville, Tennessee; and Cleveland, Mississippi.³

Dudley's ability to address to the unique social challenges of the territory he served was of special importance to the growth and stability of the North American Division during his tenure. This included, first, the need to provide material as well as moral support to a number of institutions critical to the progress of black Adventism throughout the division. Primary among these were Riverside Hospital and Sanitarium (1901-1983), Oakwood College (now Oakwood University, founded in 1896) and *Message* magazine (originated in 1936). Second, because, the territory he served was, for much of his tenure, the fount of both America's and the Church's more difficult struggles against racist attitudes and practices, he found it necessary to function as both crusader for justice and ambassador of peace. His success in navigating these challenges is rightly regarded as a major contribution to racial understanding within the North American Division.⁴

Other efforts and achievements that distinguished his service at the local conference level included the following:⁵

- 1) Energetic support of public evangelism throughout the territory he served. Those efforts were especially fruitful in the Huntsville, Alabama, area where, under the leadership of E. C. Ward, pastor of the Oakwood College church (1973-1994), exponential membership growth was realized throughout the city and the school's first college church was built.
- 2) Continuing verbal and financial support of Christian education. This was most clearly evidenced in his lengthy service as vice chairman of the Oakwood College Board of Trustees, during which the school's enrollment expanded from approximately 400 to over 1400.
- 3) Having in his conference, by the end of his presidency, both of the two churches with the highest annual tithe income among the approximately 1,000 primarily black congregations in North America. The leadership of these two congregations (both in Huntsville, Alabama) in this important aspect of ministry has remained unchallenged.

Dudley's posture in matters of regional conference planning and development was guided by the principle of "modified self-determination." He believed that these units would be best served were they allowed to function in tandem with each other in unions rather than among other local (state) conferences. As one of the self-named "Committee of Ten" that steered the highly publicized push for black unions in the North American Division (1969-1981), he vigorously fostered this position and was recognized as a leading voice for social and structural change. Because of his strong influence in matters affecting the work of regional conferences, he was,

for much of his presidency, widely regarded as the inspirational leader of that sector of the North American Division.⁶

Dudley's belief that the local conference level was where mission could be best understood and accomplished caused him, on a number of occasions, to refuse consideration of office in the upper levels of church structure—union, division, and General Conference.⁷ Along with his leadership acumen, Dudley was blessed with singing ability and journalistic talent. This latter gift, utilized diligently in his retirement, resulted in his authoring three stimulating studies: *Thou Who Has Brought Us: The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination Among African Americans* (1997), *The Genealogy of Ellen Gould Harmon White* (1999) and *Thou Who Has Brought Us Thus Far on Our Way* (2000).

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. "Continuing a Legacy," Charles and Etta Dudley Foundation, accessed November 26, 2019, <http://thecharlesettadudleyfoundation.com/>.
2. "Charles E. Dudley (1927-2010)," blacksdahistory.org, accessed November 26, 2019, www.blacksdahistory.org/charles-e--dudley.html.
3. "Continuing a Legacy."

4. Calvin B. Rock, *Protest and Progress: Black Seventh-day Adventist Leadership and the Push for Parity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2018), 128-130.
5. Calvin B. Rock, personal knowledge as president of Oakwood College (1971-1985) and General Conference vice-president (1985-2002).
6. Rock, *Protest and Progress*, 104-115, 122, 141-143, 299-300.
7. "Charles E. Dudley (1927-2010)."

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