

# Christian, John Willis (1876–1963)

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## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist*, the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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John W. Christian, pastor and administrator, was president of the South Dakota, Nebraska, and Chicago conferences and of the Southwestern Union and Pacific Union conferences.



John W. Christian.

Credit: Ancestry.com.

## Heritage and Education

John Willis Christian, born on April 28, 1876, in Owatonna Minnesota, to parents of Danish heritage, Hans and Anna Kathrine Andersdatter Christian, was the second youngest of five children who survived infancy. His siblings were Theodore Lars (b. 1866), Anna Catherine (b. 1868), Andrew Ernest (b. 1870), Lewis Harrison (b. 1871), and Mattie Ethelen (b. 1877).<sup>1</sup> Hans Christian had been a Baptist and Anna Kathrine a Lutheran before they became Seventh-day Adventists and raised their children in that church. As a teenager, John made his own commitment to the faith and was baptized at Owatonna in 1893 by Elder Gerald B. Tripp.<sup>2</sup>

John attended the local public schools through the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and then spent a year at a Baptist academy. In 1895 he advanced to Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, completing the Biblical course in 1898.<sup>3</sup>

## Marriage and Early Ministry

After teaching church school in Minnesota during the 1898-1899 schoolyear, John began evangelistic work in the South Dakota Conference. In his first assignment, he worked with Charles A. Burman at Elk Point and the following year with Andrew Nelson in Dell Rapids, both efforts resulting in formation of a new company of

believers.<sup>4</sup>

On September 4, 1901, John married Tillie Victoria Petersen at Alcester, South Dakota. Elder Noah W. Allee performed the ceremony.<sup>5</sup> John and Tillie's only son, Percy Willis, was born in 1907.

Following their marriage the couple spent a year in North Dakota where John's evangelistic labors led to organization of a church at Jamestown. Returning to South Dakota, he engaged in ministerial work and served as conference education secretary from 1905 to 1907. He was elected president of the South Dakota Conference in June 1907.<sup>6</sup>

## Conference Administrator

Two years later, Elder Christian accepted a major shift in responsibility as the first secretary (director) of the North American Negro Department, newly created by vote of the 1909 General Conference, with Nashville, Tennessee, designated as its office locale.<sup>7</sup> He promptly formulated a proposal for organizing and financing the department's work and submitted it to the General Conference Committee on October 10.<sup>8</sup> Less than two months later, though, he resigned after a physician diagnosed him with tuberculosis, and recommended that he return to a northern climate for recuperation.<sup>9</sup>

After a few months back in South Dakota, Christian had recovered sufficient strength to accept election to the presidency of the Nebraska Conference in 1910, his head office located in Hastings. He served in this office for four years, with ex-officio membership on the Union College executive committee among his responsibilities. A debt crisis at that institution was the main reason that he was called in 1914 to head an "institutional relief campaign." Christian was named "financial agent" for both the Northern and Central Union conferences, responsible for raising funds from major donors—"gifts, legacies, bequests, and non-interest bearing loans from men of means."<sup>10</sup>

A series of calls to administrative positions followed this special two-year assignment. In 1916, Christian was elected president of the Southwestern Union Conference. Then, in 1918, he was called to the West Coast to serve as president of the Pacific Union Conference, holding that position for four years.<sup>11</sup>

Returning to the Midwest, Elder Christian's service as a conference president was interrupted in 1922 when he ministered in the Illinois Conference for close to a year.<sup>12</sup> Following this brief interlude, in April 1923, he was elected as president of the Chicago Conference, which included, in addition to metropolitan Chicago, several counties in northern Illinois and Lake County in Indiana.<sup>13</sup> At the conclusion of seven years in this office, the conference experienced a net growth rate of more than 50 percent, going from a little over 1,800 in 1923 to 2,796 in 1930.<sup>14</sup>

## Pastor and Chaplain

With his resignation from the Chicago Conference presidency in 1930, Christian left denominational employment for six years. He remained in the Chicago area, and reports in the *Lake Union Herald* indicate that he was quite active in the Chicago North Shore Church, then functioned as pastor of the La Grange Church beginning in 1933, though his name did not appear in the denominational yearbook.<sup>15</sup>

He returned to the denominational workforce in 1936, serving as pastor of the Rochester district in the Minnesota Conference until 1955. During these years he also served as a chaplain at the renowned Mayo Clinic.<sup>16</sup>

John and Tillie Christian retired in 1955, well past a typical age, and moved to College Place, Washington, where their son, Percy W. Christian, was president of Walla Walla College. On February 14, 1957, Tillie passed away at Walla Walla and was taken for interment to Big Springs Cemetery near Alcester, South Dakota.<sup>17</sup> John remained at Walla Walla until his death on July 20, 1963.<sup>18</sup> He rests alongside Tillie in South Dakota.<sup>19</sup>

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## NOTES

1. "John Willis Christian," *FamilySearch*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/LYD1-XQX>.
2. John Willis Christian Biographical Information Blank, October 17, 1905. Secretariat Files, RG 21, Record 114885, GCA.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.* See also C.A. Burman and John Christian, "South Dakota," *ARH*, May 23, 1899, 333.
5. Christian Biographical Information Blank, October 17, 1905.
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7. "General Conference Committee in Council," *ARH*, June 17, 1909, 24; J.W. Christian, "The Negro Cause," *Gospel Herald*, November 1909, 1.
8. General Conference Committee, October 10, 1909, 105, GCA.
9. General Conference Committee, November 29, 1909, 134, GCA.
10. R.A. Underwood, "Institutional Relief Campaign," *Central Union Outlook*, July 28, 1914, 1-2.
11. "John Willis Christian obituary," *ARH*, September 5, 1963, 25.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1923, 42-43.
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1924, 41-42.
14. J.W. Christian, "Chicago Conference President's Report to Sixth Biennial Session," *Lake Union Herald*, April 9, 1930, 5.
15. See, for example, J.W. Christian, "The North Shore Church," *Lake Union Herald*, May 3, 1932, 4; J.W. Christian, "La Grange Church," *Lake Union Herald*, January 30, 1934, 6.
16. "John Willis Christian obituary."
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