

Starks, Walter Merrell (1917–2001)

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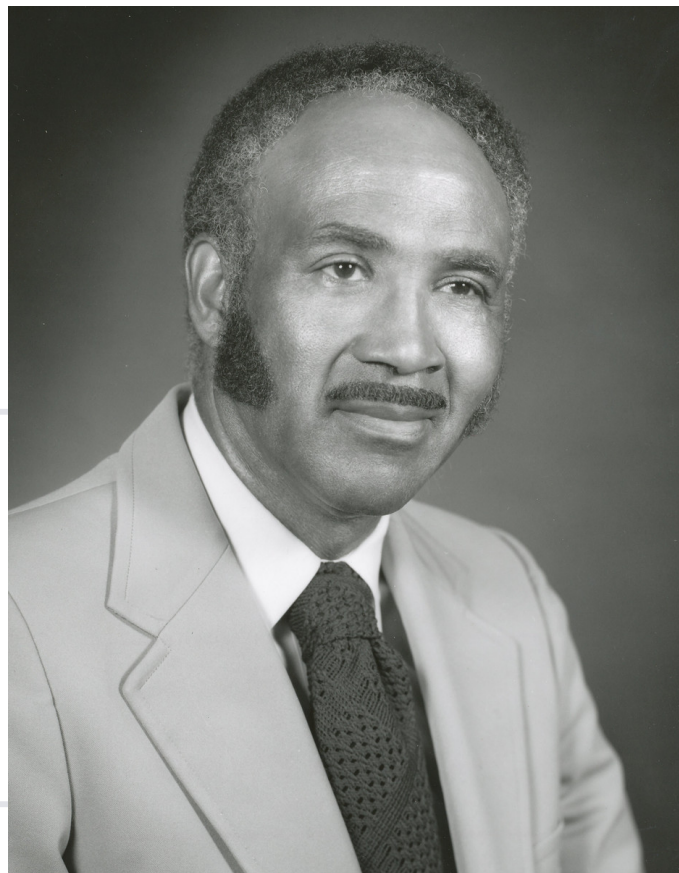
Walter M. Starks, pastor and evangelist, organized the Department of Stewardship and Development at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and served as its first director.

Early Life, Education, and Marriage

Walter M. Starks was born December 17, 1917, in Columbus, Georgia, to Jessie L. Starks (c. 1887-1917) and Florence Stovall Starks (c. 1888-1977). Jesse, who worked as a boatman on the Chattahoochee River, died while his wife was pregnant with Walter. Florence Starks, a devout Seventh-day Adventist, raised Walter and his three older sisters, Lillie (b. 1912), Beatrice (b. 1915), and Louise (b. 1916) as a widow, working as a laundress¹

Walter first felt a call to gospel ministry at age 11. In 1932, during the midst of the Great Depression, 14-year-old Walter made his way to Huntsville, Alabama, to study at Oakwood Junior College, beginning with the secondary grades. To pay for his tuition and expenses, he worked on the college farm and as a night watchman and a coal-stoker.²

After completing the ministerial course at Oakwood in 1941, Starks began ministry in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference. He was ordained in Atlanta on October 20, 1945.³ Walter married Dorothy Alice Nickerson (1922-



Walter M. Starks

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

2022), whom he met at Oakwood, on August 30, 1942, in Detroit, Michigan. They became partners in ministry and had seven children: three daughters, Irene Florence, Peggy Louise, and Elaine Marvene; and four sons, Walter Merrell, Jr., John Arthur, David Kelton, and Gregory Bernard.⁴

Pastoral-Evangelistic Ministry in the South

Starks became a part of the ministerial force in the South Atlantic Conference, one of the new Black-administered regional conferences, when it began operation in January 1946. He served three of the conference's largest congregations over the next eight years, beginning in Tampa, Florida.⁵ A winsome preacher and strong organizer, Starks was also an effective evangelist, as exemplified in two successive campaigns following his transfer to the Miami, Florida, district in March 1950. His campaign in Fort Lauderdale later that year brought 61 new members into the church.⁶ In 1951 he conducted a series in Miami that led to the baptism of 48 persons.⁷

After a year and a half of intensive labor in southern Florida, Starks was called to new responsibilities in Georgia as pastor of the Atlanta Berean church. While there, he furthered his education by taking courses at Morehouse College.⁸ In the summer of 1954, Starks moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where he served for two and a half years as director of the Home Missionary and Sabbath School departments in the South Central Conference.⁹

Dupont Park, Debt Liquidation, and Evangelism

The Allegheny Conference called Starks to the pulpit of one of its largest churches, the Glenville Church in Cleveland, Ohio, in January 1957, and then, in December 1959, transferred him to another, the Dupont Park Church in Washington, D.C.¹⁰ This church, previously named Ephesus, had outgrown its quarters at Sixth and N Streets, Northwest, and in April 1959, eight months before Starks' arrival, had begun worshipping in an impressive new edifice in the Fort Dupont area. Its construction had been seen as a triumph of faith, yet a heavy debt of \$450,000 remained to be paid.¹¹

As pastor, Starks emphasized the importance of rapid liquidation of the building debt. Attempting simply to meet the large monthly payments along with the regular operating budget, he believed, would keep the church under a heavy financial burden that would cripple its mission for decades to come. In a pamphlet titled "A Venture of Faith," Starks outlined spiritual principles and practical methods by which the church could achieve substantial reduction in the building debt while still fully funding a vibrant program of evangelism and nurture. He showed how the goal could be met by members giving at varying monthly levels ranging from \$2 to \$40. In considering their place in that plan, he encouraged members to reflect on the question, "How much do I need to give as a faithful Christian?" rather than, "How much does my church need?"¹²

The intensive effort at building debt reduction did not crowd out the church's evangelistic ministry. One effort of long-term significance took place in Sandy Spring, Maryland, about 20 miles to the north of Washington, D.C., where some Dupont Park members had family ties and wanted to see a church planted in the area. After several months of preparatory work, Starks conducted a two-month series of public meetings, along with a full complement of Bible workers, musicians, and other supporting personnel from the Dupont Park Church as well as the First Church in Washington, D.C. Members of other Adventist churches then joined 19 new believers in establishing a new congregation, pastored by Starks, organized as the Sandy Spring Church on February 1, 1964.¹³ In 1972, the congregation built a new house of worship in Brinklow, Maryland.¹⁴ Renamed Emmanuel-Brinklow, the growing congregation reported 1,139 members as of 2022.¹⁵

By the time Starks' pastorate at Dupont Park concluded at the end of 1964, the building debt had been reduced to only \$19,000.¹⁶ He was at the leading edge of a new endeavor in Adventism, based in the Columbia Union Conference, to frame the giving of tithes and offerings within "stewardship"—faithfulness in the use of all things entrusted to the Christian by God, such as time, abilities, and natural resources, as well as money. The Columbia Union Conference became, in 1963, the first to establish a Stewardship Department.¹⁷ The Allegheny Conference asked Starks to launch its new Stewardship and Development Department in 1965.¹⁸

"Mr. Stewardship"

When the Allegheny Conferences divided to form the Allegheny East and Allegheny West Conferences in November 1966, Starks was elected the first president of Allegheny West.¹⁹ He had only served a few months when, in early 1967, General Conference (GC) President Robert H. Pierson asked him to organize a Stewardship and Development department at the GC. Starks was officially elected to the position at the Spring Meeting of the GC Committee in April 1967. He served as the department's first director for close to 13 years (1967-1979), becoming widely-known as "Mr. Stewardship."²⁰ According to Harold Lee, who later served in the GC Stewardship department, Starks' approach was "scripturally-based" and "grace-centered." Based on these foundations, he set forth "plain, practical methods" of teaching stewardship that were widely disseminated throughout the world church in seminars, manuals, and other training materials. His book *Principles of Christian Stewardship* was published in 1999.²¹

Walter Starks retired from denominational service in 1981 after 40 years of ministry. An avid writer, he penned scores of poems and composed more than 100 songs in a wide range of genres. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by Danial Payne College in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1969. The Review and Herald published his autobiography, *Ordeal By Fire: What God and Perseverance Can Do* in 1976. Elder Starks died at his home in Waldorf, Maryland, on April 4, 2001, at the age of 83.²²

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