

Abernathy, William Earl (1886–1964)

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William E. Abernathy served the church for 36 years primarily in the roles of institutional management and financial administration.

Background and Conversion

William Earl Abernathy was born April 14, 1886, in Atlanta, Georgia, to William C. Abernathy (1857-1890) and Drucilla Elizabeth Abernathy (1859-1934). Earl's only sibling was a sister, Pearl (1888-1981). He married Mamie Felicia Johns (1889-1931) in Atlanta on June 15, 1909. Both of their children, Edna E. Abernathy (1910-1949) and Norman Lee Abernathy (1928-1956) died in young adulthood.¹

Earl Abernathy demonstrated aptitude for business management as a young man, attaining the position of chief clerk at a steamship company in Atlanta in his early 20s.² It was, perhaps, business travel that took him to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1912, where he accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message as a result of meetings conducted by F. C. Webster.³

Secretary-Treasurer, Auditor, and Transportation Agent

Abernathy promptly began canvassing Adventist books but in view of his business abilities and experience he was quickly called to management responsibilities. For a few months he managed the Atlanta branch of the



William Abernathy

From North Pacific Union Conference *Gleaner*, March 28, 1944.

Southern Publishing Association. Then in August 1913, scarcely a year after joining the church, Abernathy was elected secretary-treasurer of the Georgia Conference and secretary of the conference Tract Society.⁴

In early 1916, the Southeastern Union Conference elected Abernathy to serve as secretary-treasurer. The position also included the roles of auditor and transportation agent. With headquarters in Atlanta, the Southeastern Union included the Cumberland, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina conferences, with a combined total of 3,488 members in 115 churches at the end of 1916.⁵ After five years in the Southeastern Union office, Abernathy received “a very urgent call” in June 1921 to serve in a similar position—secretary, treasurer, and auditor—for the Lake Union Conference in Berrien Springs, Michigan.⁶ Comprising eight conferences in the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin, the Lake Union was then the second largest in North America, with a membership surpassing 14,000. The position also brought greater institutional responsibility with the union holding direct responsibility for the operation of Emmanuel Missionary College in Berrien Springs and the James White Memorial Home for the aged in Battle Creek.⁷

The General Conference tapped Abernathy’s financial acumen in 1926, calling him to serve as assistant auditor.⁸ He held the position for three and a half years, making several trips overseas in conducting his responsibilities.⁹

Sanitarium Manager

Abernathy’s career took a new direction at the close of 1929 when he accepted a call to serve as manager of Hinsdale Sanitarium, west of Chicago. Established in 1905 by Drs. David and Mary Paulson, Hinsdale, though financially independent of the denomination, was “in very close affiliation” with it. By 1930 it had become one of Adventism’s leading health care centers, with capacity for 150 residents and an affiliated nurses training school. According to *Review* editor Francis M. Wilcox, Abernathy rendered “excellent and efficient service” as manager.¹⁰

After about a year and a half at Hinsdale, though, Abernathy returned to the South to manage another self-supporting Adventist institution, the Will Mason Memorial Hospital in Murray, Kentucky. Though smaller than Hinsdale, it likewise operated a nurses training school.¹¹ Soon after the move to Kentucky, Abernathy’s wife, Mamie, became seriously ill and died on October 31, 1931.¹² By this time the Abernathy’s daughter, Edna, was 21, but Earl was left with responsibility for their two-year-old son, Norman. A year later, Abernathy married Pearl Zinn (1911-2012) in St. Louis, Missouri.¹³

Abernathy seemed to thrive in hospital management. While at Mason Memorial, he was elected vice president of the Kentucky State Hospital Association.¹⁴ After two and a half years in Kentucky, his skills were again in demand at a major Adventist institution. He accepted a call to Florida Hospital and Sanitarium in Orlando where he served as manager from 1934 to 1937. “Under his management the financial showing is a very favorable one,” wrote the chair of the institution’s board near the conclusion of Abernathy’s three years in Orlando.¹⁵

Service in the Southwest and North Pacific

In 1937, Abernathy returned to conference financial administration, serving a year as secretary-treasurer of the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference.¹⁶ He moved to Keene, Texas, in 1938 where he served as secretary-treasurer and auditor for the Southwestern Union Conference. The union oversaw a far-flung territory that included the Arkansas-Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, and Texico conferences (the latter comprising most of New Mexico and a portion of western Texas) and it operated Southwestern Junior College, also located in Keene. At the close of his five and half years at this post, Abernathy was described as a “strong leader” and “valuable counselor” whose work had placed the union “on a good financial basis.”¹⁷

From 1944 to 1946 Abernathy filled the positions of secretary-treasurer, auditor, and transportation agent for the North Pacific Union Conference, headquartered in Portland, Oregon. As with his previous assignment, this union administered a tertiary educational institution—Walla Walla College in Washington—and an expansive territory made up of the Alaska Mission and the Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Upper Columbia, and Washington conferences, though its membership, at about 27,000, was more than twice as large as the Southwestern Union's.¹⁸

Post-War China

For his final assignment with the denomination, the General Conference elected Abernathy treasurer and auditor of the China Division in 1946, entrusting him with responsibility for administering the nearly \$2 million it appropriated for rebuilding the medical, educational, and publishing institutions in China that had been decimated during World War II.¹⁹

The ongoing civil war between the Nationalist and Communist forces made the circumstances formidable, with “unprecedented inflation and changing governments” greatly complicating financial transactions. Though failing health forced Abernathy to return to the United States after a year in China, he, his successor, R. H. Adair, and associate, S. J. Lee, navigated the challenges and the rebuilding endeavor was largely successful by 1948.²⁰ However, the Communist victory in 1949 would soon bring to an end the era of Adventism's institution-based missionary work in China.

Contribution

W. Earl Abernathy brought a high level of competence to financial administration at every level of the denomination's administrative structure while also endearing himself to colleagues with the spirit he brought to the work. As one union conference president put it, “Brother Abernathy is a Christian, and his influence has been appreciated by his associates.”²¹

His retirement, with his wife Pearl, in the Portland, Oregon, area was marred by illness and by the tragic death of his 28-year-old son, Norman, in a private plane crash on October 16, 1956.²² Nevertheless, Earl Abernathy was remembered as “a source of cheer and courage” to those around him during these final years. He was 78 years old when he died August 3, 1964, at Portland Sanitarium.²³

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