

Sandefur, Charles Cree (1914–1994)

JAMES (JIM) ARTHUR GREENE, AND JOYCE ANN (KESLAKE) GREENE

James (Jim) Arthur Greene graduated from Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University) in 1967 with a degree in Accounting. He served the church in various administrative capacities, including treasurer of the East Indonesia Union, vice president of finance at Loma Linda University, Columbia Union College, and the Rocky Mountain Conference, and as executive secretary of the New Jersey Conference. Greene retired in 2014 after over 48 years of service. Jim and co-author Joyce Ann Keslake Greene were married in 1964, a union that was blessed with three children.

Joyce Ann (Keslake) Greene was born in Massachusetts but grew up in Orlando, Florida. After a period of twenty years in which she married co-author Jim, mothered their three children, and studied at four different colleges, she graduated with honors from Loma Linda University – La Sierra Campus in 1982 with a B.S. degree in Accounting. Her professional career included service as director of payroll at Loma Linda University and as associate treasurer of the New Jersey Conference.



Charles Cree Sandefur.

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

Cree Sandefur served the church for more than four decades as a pastor, conference departmental director, conference president, and union president.

Early Life and Education

Cree was born in Bowie, Texas, on February 23, 1914, to R. J. and Alma Sandefur, the youngest of six brothers and sisters. The family moved to Keene, Texas, where the children could receive Christian education. There Cree attended elementary school, academy and Southwestern Junior College. He picked cotton in the summers to earn money for his tuition and school clothes.¹

In 1934 he went on to Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, the nearest Adventist senior college, to complete a bachelor's degree. Because of the Great Depression, however, he stayed only a year and returned to Keene to start his own broommaking business. After two years he realized that there was more to life than just making money, so he left the business to his parents and returned to Union.² Cree was elected president of the senior class of 1938, early evidence of his leadership ability.³

During his senior year Cree met and began courting Mildred Marie Priest (1911–2004) of Wichita, Kansas. Mildred had taught school for a few years after completing the normal course at Union and, like Cree, had returned to the college for her final year in 1937–1938.

Marriage and Early Ministry in Texas

After graduation the couple continued a long-distance courtship while Cree began his ministry in Texas. He served as an associate evangelist for several months, before beginning pastoral ministry in Tyler, where he led a district of five churches.⁴

Cree and Mildred married on September 9, 1940. Their marriage would be blessed with two sons: Charles Cree Sandefur, Jr. (b. 1946), and Jere Lynn Sandefur (b. 1952).⁵ Their first home in Tyler was two rooms in the back of the church that the members were buying. Their rent paid the monthly payments on the church mortgage.⁶

In 1941 Sandefur was called to pastor in San Antonio and was ordained by the Texas Conference that summer in Keene. The following day the newly ordained Sandefur had the privilege of baptizing his own father as his first baptism.⁷

Conference Departmental Leadership

The following year the Texico Conference, headquartered in Clovis, New Mexico, invited Sandefur to serve as education and Missionary Volunteer secretary (director). Then, in October 1944, Sandefur accepted a call to the same position in the Iowa Conference. In announcing the change, Texico Conference president R. R. Bietz, stated: “Elder Sandefur has done very commendable work in our field. His enthusiasm, coupled with good judgement, has been very profitable to our field.”⁸

Sandefur served in Iowa until August 1946, when he accepted a call from the Washington Conference to serve as youth director. Don H. Spillman, Washington Conference president, informed his constituents that “Elder Sandefur, while a young man, has had years of experience in our young people’s work both in evangelism and in junior camp and progressive classwork.”⁹

From Southern California to Hawaii and Back

By 1950 Sandefur was ready to return to his original calling—pastoral ministry. He accepted the invitation of Southern California Conference to pastor, first in Pasadena and then Long Beach.¹⁰

Less than five years later, though, his ministry entered a new phase. At the February 1955 Pacific Union Conference constituency session, Cree Sandefur was elected president of the Hawaiian Mission.¹¹ He served for five years in Hawaii before being elected president of the Southern California Conference in May 1960.¹²

This was a major transition in level of responsibility. The Hawaiian Mission reported 2,290 members in 1960. At 20,649, Southern California's membership was the largest of any conference in North America, even surpassing that of three of the division's union conferences. Growth continued under Sandefur's administration, with a net increase of nearly 4,000 members by 1966.¹³

Union Conference President

In 1966 Sandefur was elected president of the Columbia Union Conference, comprised of local conferences in the mid-Atlantic region, then headquartered in Takoma Park, Maryland. He faced a major crisis in February 1970 when a fire destroyed Columbia Hall on the campus of Columbia Union College in Takoma Park. The college was a Columbia Union institution, and as president Sandefur chaired the school's board of trustees. He was quick to issue a confidence-building statement in the first issue of the *Columbia Union Visitor* to appear after the fire:

"There is no thought of closing the school or of severely cutting back the program of the college. The board of trustees is firmly committed to a bright future for Columbia Union College, and all plans are geared in that direction. Never have Adventist youth been more deserving of quality Christian education. It will be provided for them on the campus of CUC.

"The future of the college is bright and promising. Though the fire has compounded the financial problems of the school, we are not discouraged. We accept problems as a challenge. God's storehouse is unlimited."¹⁴

A \$3.1 million Campus Center (renamed Wilkinson Hall in 1982) was rapidly completed in time for the beginning of the 1970 fall semester and the college's enrollment remained steady.¹⁵

The Columbia Union Revolving Fund (CURF) began under Sandefur's leadership. The CURF provided low-interest loans for church building projects while at the same time offering church members who deposited their moneys into the fund with a safe and profitable investment. During Sandefur's administration, the CURF resulted in an annual aggregate savings of \$50,000 for church building construction.¹⁶

Sandefur's leadership, according to one of his associates, was "characterized by fairness" and "equal support to all departments, institutions, and programs." He was also credited for "the courageous manner in which he has attacked some major and delicate problems that have faced his administration."¹⁷

Patricia Habada and Rebecca Brillhart write that "Sandefur co-presided with Willis Quigley, president of the Potomac Conference, in ordaining Josephine Benton (1972) as a local elder in the Brotherhood church located in Washington, D.C. Benton was the first woman to be ordained as a local church elder."¹⁸

The Sandefurs returned to the West Coast in 1973 when Sandefur accepted the call to serve as president of the Pacific Union Conference, then the largest union (by membership) in the North American Division, its administrative office located in Glendale, California. Membership growth had been strong during his presidency

of the Columbia Union, increasing from 49,445 in 1966 to 58,845 when he left in 1973.¹⁹ The Pacific Union experienced similar growth during his years of leadership there, from 114,267 in 1973 to 136,735 in 1979.

GC Nominating Committee Chair

Recognized by his fellow church leaders for his skill and fairness in chairing committees, Sandefur was elected to chair the nominating committee at the 1975 General Conference session held in Vienna, Austria.²⁰ At the 1978 Annual Council he was again selected by church world leaders to chair a special nominating committee to select a new General Conference president to replace Robert H. Pierson, who was retiring.²¹

The special committee nominated Neal C. Wilson, the General Conference vice president for North America, to be the new General Conference president. That made it necessary to fill Wilson's position. Sandefur's name was one of five initially placed in nomination to be the new vice president for North America (or president of the North American Division, the title that would be emphasized in subsequent years). In fact, he was the prospective nominee that Wilson favored for election to lead the North American Division. However, Sandefur, who would turn 65 the following year, had already reached a firm decision to retire, and despite strong urging from Wilson to make himself available, withdrew from consideration.²²

Contribution

After his retirement from the presidency of the Pacific Union Conference in 1979,²³ Cree and Mildred Sandefur moved back to his boyhood home of Keene, Texas. In his retirement years at Keene, Sandefur continued to serve the church in a variety of capacities, sitting on hospital, college, and church boards, while also mentoring young pastors and preaching in local churches. In 1988 the Sandefurs moved to Loma Linda, California, where Cree Sandefur passed quietly to his rest on July 26, 1994.²⁴

Through 41 consecutive years of service, Charles Cree Sandefur left a legacy of highly-respected leadership in pastoral and youth ministry and as a conference and union conference president. Among the untold number he influenced in becoming church leaders, was his son, Charles Sandefur, Jr., who has served as president of the Rocky Mountain Conference, the Mid-America Union Conference, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, among other positions.

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NOTES

1. Charles Cree Sandefur, Jr., "Cree Sandefur—A Life Sketch," unpublished manuscript, copy in author's possession.
2. Ibid.
3. "Union College News Items," *Northern Union Outlook*, January 7, 1938, 2.
4. Sandefur, Jr., "Cree Sandefur—A Life Sketch."
5. Charles Cree Sandefur, Jr., email to Jim Greene, March 19, 2019.
6. Sandefur, Jr., "Cree Sandefur—A Life Sketch."
7. Ibid.
8. R. R. Bietz, "A New M.V. and Educational Secretary for Texico," *Southwestern Union Record*, November 1, 1944, 6, 7.

9. Don H. Spillman, "Young People's Department of the Conference," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, July 2, 1946, 8.
10. Sandefur, Jr., "Cree Sandefur—A Life Sketch."
11. "Quadrennial Session, Pacific Union Conference," *Pacific Union Recorder*, February 21, 1955, 1.
12. Alvin G. Munson, "Elder Cree Sandefur Elected President Southern California Conference," *Pacific Union Recorder*, May 23, 1960, 1.
13. *Annual Statistical Report*, 1960, 6, and 1966, 6, Office of Archives Statistics, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, accessed December 24, 2019, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/>.
14. Cree Sandefur, "Statement From Chairman Columbia Union College Board of Trustees," *Columbia Union Visitor*, March 19, 1970, 5.
15. Morton Juberg, "New Campus Center Serves College," *Columbia Union Visitor*, August 20, 1970, 3. The college's enrollment dropped slightly from 1,002 in 1970 to 961 in 1971 and 951 in 1973; see *Annual Statistical Report*, 1970, 22, 1971, 22, and 1973, 22, accessed December 24, 2019, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/>.
16. Charles R. Beeler, "Sandefur Accepts Presidency of Pacific Union," *Columbia Union Visitor*, November 8, 1973, 1.
17. Ibid.
18. Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart, *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women* (TEAMPress, 1985), 340.
19. Beeler, "Sandefur Accepts Presidency of Pacific Union."
20. "The Nominating Committee," *ARH*, July 13, 1975, 9.
21. "The Special Nominating Committee," *ARH*, November 2, 1978, 5.
22. Calvin B. Rock, *Protest and Progress: Black Seventh-day Adventist Leadership and the Push for Parity* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2018), 111, 112; Charles Sandefur, Jr., email, December 24, 2019.
23. Charles E. Bradford, "New Pacific Union Officers," *ARH*, April 12, 1979, 24.
24. Sandefur, Jr., "Cree Sandefur—A Life Sketch."

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