

Saunders, Emmanuel (1929–2016)

SAMUEL LONDON, AND CIRO SEPULVEDA

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Ciro Sepulveda, Ph.D., is a retired professor and former chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama. He is the author of several books, including *On the Margins of Empires: A History of Seventh-day Adventists* and *Ellen White on the Color Line: The Idea of Race in a Christian Community*.

Emmanuel Saunders was a beloved mentor, history professor, and department chair at Oakwood College (now a university), who devoted more than thirty years of his life to the cause of Adventist education.

Emmanuel was born on July 13, 1929, in Marabella, Trinidad, to Robert Saunders (d. 1938) and Rose Straker (d. 1956). A devoted Christian, he was baptized at an early age at the San Fernando Seventh-day Adventist Church. His father's death, a result of heart failure, and the devastating effects of the worldwide Depression left the family impoverished. Emmanuel's mother became the family's sole provider in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Mrs. Saunders, a devout Seventh-day Adventist, read Ellen White's book *Education* and immediately decided that her seven children would all learn a trade. Emmanuel became a tailor. This occupation paved the road to higher education. With the money earned from it he attended high school and college, the first in his family to do so.¹ He enrolled in Caribbean Union College (now the University of the Southern Caribbean), in Trinidad's Maracas Valley.² In 1958 he graduated and became a schoolteacher at Southern Academy in San Fernando, Trinidad.³

On October 4, 1959, Saunders married his childhood sweetheart, Pearl Thorpe. Unfortunately, after ten months of marriage, she died. The tragedy motivated him to leave Trinidad in 1961 for America, where he furthered his education.⁴

In 1962 the United States was experiencing racial upheaval, and Saunders was affected by it. He enrolled in Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University), in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Although he encountered unexpected bigotry, he did not let it deter him from pursuing his studies. Not all the college's whites were racists, but Saunders ultimately decided to continue his education elsewhere, transferring to Howard University in Washington, D.C, in 1963.



Emmanuel Saunders
Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

During his Howard years Saunders participated in the civil rights movement. He was present at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and participated in the Poor People's March on Washington in 1968. Saunders personally understood the need for these events. For instance, a Holiday Inn in Washington, D.C., refused to rent him a room because he was black.⁵ Likewise, when black Adventist students visited white Adventist churches in the D.C. area, church members would usually ask them if they would not be more comfortable going to the black Adventist church instead.

At Howard he married Ethel Roberts. Out of this union came three children: Sandra, David, and Judie. To support his family and himself, Saunders took a variety of jobs at different times working as a waiter, nursing home attendant, fruit picker, and taxicab driver. When the children were grown, the marriage ended in divorce.

Three years after entering Howard University, Saunders earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history, followed by master's and doctoral degrees in the same subject in 1969 and 1976, respectively. A specialist in Latin American history, he taught at Howard University as an assistant professor from 1969 to 1977.⁶

In 1978 Saunders joined the faculty in the History Department at Oakwood College, where he taught Latin American history, American history, the Negro in America, and African history.⁷ He also introduced a new course, The Black Diaspora.⁸ He enjoyed the atmosphere at Oakwood, taking personal interest in his students and routinely going out of his way to help them.

In 1990 Saunders became the chair of the History Department.⁹ One of his goals was to expand the department by providing more options for students. Furthermore, he wanted to "make the History Department the channel for students interested in law."¹⁰ However, while many students wanted to go to law school, they did not necessarily want to major in history to get there, seeing teaching as the only option for history degree graduates. Hence, he worked with the necessary committees to introduce two new majors, political science and international studies, to make the History Department a training ground for future lawyers.¹¹ When he learned that an Oakwood staff worker had recently attained a master's degree in political science, he asked her to join the department.¹² In 1995 Saunders introduced Anne Smith-Winbush as the department's first full-time woman professor.¹³

In 1999 Saunders retired from the chair and full-time teaching, but served as an adjunct professor until 2009.¹⁴ In his retirement one of his main objectives was to finish *The Making of Trinidad Non-White Communities: Their Common Challenges With African Americans*, a book he had started in 1996.¹⁵ During this time he taught a Sabbath school class at the Oakwood University church. In 2010 Saunders married Megan Ahing in New York City.¹⁶ Emmanuel Saunders died on March 17, 2016, in Huntsville, Alabama. He was 86 years old.

Saunders' own words are indicative of his legacy. When asked for a one-word description of himself, he replied, "Hard working."¹⁷ When one works hard, he explained, things tend to fall into place. His advice to students was to "always want to be the best, because mediocrity will never suffice."¹⁸ He also encouraged them to "soar not too high to fall, but stoop to conquer."¹⁹ He felt that because he had followed his own advice and had God's blessings in doing so, he had achieved most of his goals. Asked how he wanted to be remembered, Saunders said: "If I can help somebody along life's way, then my living will not have been in vain."²⁰

SOURCES

"Emmanuel Saunders obituary." Oakwood University church, March 28, 2016.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984–1998.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960, 1961, 1978–1983.

NOTES

1. Emmanuel Saunders, interview by Bernude Jesucat, Huntsville, Alabama, November 15, 2012.?
2. "Emmanuel Saunders obituary," Oakwood University church, March 28, 2016.?
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 265. See also *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1961), 272.?
4. Emmanuel Saunders, interview by Bernude Jesucat, Huntsville, Alabama, November 15, 2012.?
5. Ibid.?
6. "Emmanuel Saunders obituary."?
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 378; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*

(1979), 388; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1980), 382; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1981), 388; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1982), 408; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1983), 426; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), 427; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1985), 441; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1986), 444; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1987), 437; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1988), 446; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1989), 409.?

8. Emmanuel Saunders, interview by Bernude Jesucat, Huntsville, Alabama, November 15, 2012.?
9. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1990), 423; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1991), 426; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1992), 422; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1993), 405; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1994), 416; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1995), 422; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1996), 434; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1997), 446; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1998), 458; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1999), 465.?
10. Emmanuel Saunders, interview by Bernude Jesucat, Huntsville, Alabama, November 15, 2012.?
11. Ibid.?
12. Ibid.?
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1995), 422.?
14. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1999), 465.?
15. Emmanuel Sanders, interview by Bernude Jesucat, Huntsville, Alabama, November 15, 2012.?
16. "Emmanuel Saunders obituary," Oakwood University church, March 28, 2016.?
17. Emmanuel Sanders, interview by Bernude Jesucat, Huntsville, Alabama, November 15, 2012.?
18. Ibid.?
19. Ibid.?
20. Ibid.?

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