

# Forde, Wilbert Durant (1880–1965)

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## GLENN O. PHILLIPS

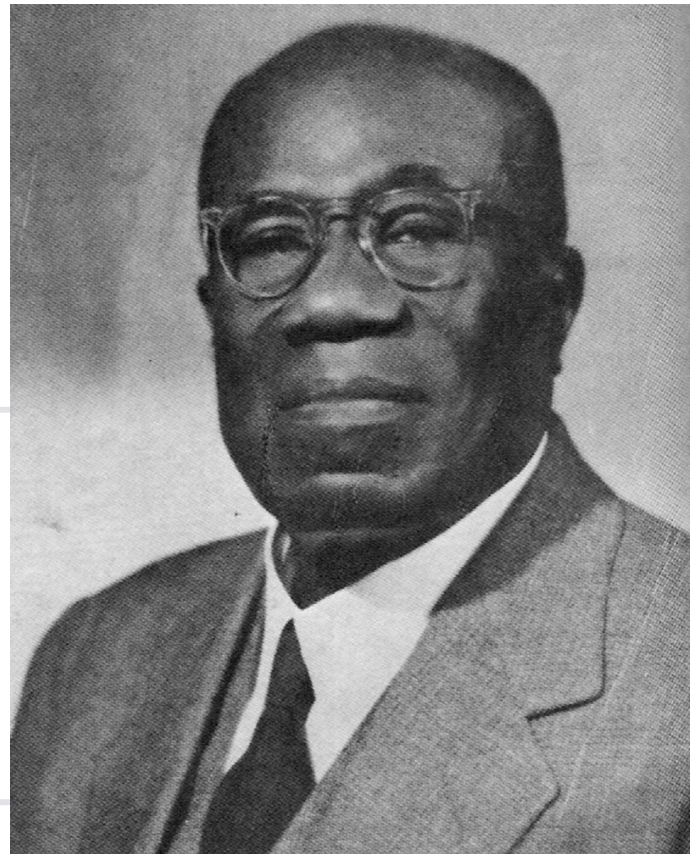
Glenn O. Phillips, Ph.D. (Howard University, Washington, D.C.), although retired, is actively writing, researching, lecturing, and publishing. He was a professor at Morgan State University, Howard University, and the University of the Southern Caribbean. He has authored and published numerous articles, book reviews, and books, including "The African Diaspora Experience," "Singing in a Strange Land: The History of the Hanson Place Church," "African American Leaders of Maryland," and "The Caribbean Basin Initiative."

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Wilbert Durant Forde was a pioneering graduate of Emmanuel Missionary College who became one of the first Caribbean licensed ministers to serve in the eastern Caribbean starting in 1905.

After serving in the Caribbean for five years, he received an official invitation from the North Illinois Conference to evangelize within Chicago's growing African American community and over four decades became one of the most successful "Big City" evangelists preaching, teaching, and establishing many inner-city congregations—especially within the three major cities of Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis. He started holding evangelistic meetings in the city of Chicago in February of 1910 and continued baptizing large numbers of his listeners, laying the foundation for the phenomenal growth of Seventh-day Adventists among the large numbers of African Americans that joined the Seventh-day Adventist church in the 1920's in these urban centers. He also established the process that led to the building of the Shiloh SDA Church in Chicago;<sup>2</sup> it remained the largest Adventist church in the region for decades. Frequently referred to as the "scholarly minister,"<sup>3</sup> he also reached out to the white congregants and Adventist pastors to bring unity to urban evangelistic programs. It is estimated that at his retirement, he had served for over fifty years and baptized over a thousand persons into the Adventist faith.

Wilbert Durant Forde was born on November 1, 1880, in Barbados, West Indies, to George William and Margaret Forde, who were very staunch members of the leading denomination in the British colony, the



W. D. Forde

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

Anglican Church (Church of England). He received his early primary education in that church's schools where he excelled, and on completion was appointed a pupil teacher and began teaching in Bridgetown. He was an avid reader and began reading Adventist literature. During the early months of 1898, Forde attended an evangelistic crusade conducted by the first permanent Seventh-day Adventist minister assigned to Barbados, Elder Elam Van Duesen. He and five others were baptized into the Adventist faith on July 2, 1898.<sup>4</sup> Two of them, he and Charles Cave, immediately lost their teaching positions on reporting for work the next day. Both converts were encouraged by Elder Van Duesen and his wife to travel to attend the church's schools in Battle Creek, Michigan, to continue their education. Forde married Alice Knight, who with his mother were among his first converts to Adventism.<sup>5</sup> Forde left Barbados and enrolled into the recently established Emanuel Missionary College, becoming one of the first Caribbean students to attend, and he enrolled taking the ministerial course.

On completion of his studies in 1905 he returned to Barbados and worked as a licensed minister preaching and conducting Bible studies. He served as the minister of the first and only SDA church in Bridgetown, the King Street SDA Church for two years, 1905–1907. He also visited the neighboring strongly Catholic British colony of Saint Lucia and conducted the first Adventist evangelistic meetings in 1907.<sup>6</sup> He was the first resident Adventist minister assigned to this island, and over the time he spent there, he faced strong opposition from many of the Sunday clergy but was able to organize the first Adventist congregation in Castries, the main colonial town. He remained pioneering Adventism on St. Lucia for three years when he received his second call to work in the U.S., which he accepted.

In February of 1910 Elder Forde arrived in Chicago in response to the invitation of the North Illinois Conference and spearheaded the new evangelistic thrust especially for the growing African American population in the city of Chicago. Prior to his arrival some African American Adventists were attending the Southside Chicago SDA Church. Elder Forde joined the small group of believers and according to him they were "An enthusiastic, aggressive, and cooperative nucleus of twenty believers, who were at this time worshiping in a storeroom on State Street near Forty-Third Street."<sup>7</sup> He immediately worked to increase the membership and build the first African American SDA church in Chicago. In the following spring this congregation moved into a new edifice with a seating capacity of 150, but within a few years became too small for the congregation.

In 1918 this mostly African American congregation, with the financial support of the conference, purchased a larger church building that could hold the congregation that had grown to over two hundred fifty members. Elder Forde also established a Bible Training School to offer Bible, health, and academic courses during the evenings of the week to members and others in the community. He faced numerous challenges from the wider community, but the congregation continued to grow and remained there for eleven years.

In 1925 Elder Forde accepted a call to join the Indiana Conference where he shepherded congregations in the cities of South Bend, Indianapolis, Marion, and Gary. He worked to have these congregations purchase land and build their own churches.

Elder Forde moved to work for the Michigan Conference and while there his first wife died. He subsequently remarried Edith Peal Watts, a Loma Linda University trained nurse on June 25, 1929, and to this union came eight children.<sup>8</sup>

During August of 1937, Elder Forde responded to another call from the Michigan Conference, holding evangelistic meetings and establishing several companies and churches across the state. He started companies as a result of his efforts and obtained churches for the congregations in Flint and Saginaw.

In January 1945, he became one of the senior pastors in the newly formed Lake Region Conference. He was assigned to the congregation in Detroit, Michigan. He was instrumental in helping to secure for the congregation a more adequate church building on Burns Avenue. His efforts led to the burning of the \$78,000 mortgage in three years, remaining with this congregation until his retirement and celebrating 50 years as an Adventist pastor.<sup>9</sup>

Elder Forde died on May 22, 1965, with his family present at the Detroit Columbia Medical Center leaving his wife, Edith, and four of his eight children: daughters Zilda and Gladys and sons Nebert and Clarence. His funeral was held at the Burns Avenue SDA Church in Detroit on May 26, 1965.<sup>10</sup> He had dedicated his life to the spread of the Seventh-day Adventist faith and was highly regarded by generations of his converts over six decades. One author writing about his ministry referred to him as eloquent and one who preached with great “conviction” in his preaching.<sup>11</sup>

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## NOTES

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2. Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of American Seventh-day Adventists With African Heritage* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), 213, 214.
3. Jacob Justiss, *Angels of Ebony* (Toledo, Ohio: Jet Printing Service, 1975), 31.
4. Ibid.; "Early Record of the King Street SDA Church Members, 1891-1932," Volume 1 (Bridgetown, Barbados, West Indies; King Street SDA Church), 2; Glenn O. Phillips, "Barbados' Battle Creek Doctor: Dr. Charles J. B. Cave, 1879-1939," *Adventist Heritage: A Journal of Adventist History* 5, n. 2 (Winter 1978): 23-29.
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10. Ibid.; "Elder W. D. Forde: Adventist Leader to Be Buried Here."
11. Justiss, 154.

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