

Southwest Region Conference

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The Southwest Region Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Southwestern Union Conference.

Territory: Regional constituency of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico (except San Juan County), Oklahoma, and Texas.

Statistics (June 30, 2022): Churches, 92; membership, 21,030; population: 43,266,088.¹

Origins

As early as 1875, there were at least three families practicing Seventh-day Adventism in Texas, mostly limited to the north central region of the state in and around Dallas.² By 1876, Seventh-day Adventists ministered to their neighbors, both white and Black. A. B. Rust and E. G. Rust, brothers and Adventist transplants from Battle Creek, Michigan, hosted evangelistic meetings in Dallas. However, D. M. Canright, Adventist evangelist, noted the “invariable” scene he witnessed at such meetings: racial segregation. While at least 100 believers attended evangelistic meetings when Canright visited, he noted that Black members were relegated to sitting outside of the meeting house, while white members were allowed to sit inside. Noting that it was past time for Adventists to invest wholeheartedly in the souls and education of emancipated African Americans, Canright also declared that Black Adventism in northern Texas would be a distinct mission that would prove precarious due to the local customs surrounding segregation.³

Eddie Capman, “one of [the] young [Adventist] brethren,” was known to host a night school three evenings a week for recently emancipated African Americans. Held in a tiny 12x14 log cabin with “rude seats” and a “rough table,” around a dozen Black people between the ages of 8 and 40 were taught to read in what represents the earliest recorded effort by Seventh-day Adventists to teach Black adults and children in Texas.⁴

In the summer of 1876, A. B. Rust reported speaking in Mansfield at the invitation of a Black minister called Parson Medling. Rust preached to 700 freedpeople in the parson's meeting house made of logs with a large bower in the front. Notably, Medling told Rust that often white people would attend his services. In that case,

the bower would be filled with white people while the meeting house itself would be filled with freedpeople. The following week, Rust traveled elsewhere in north central Texas and preached to another group of freedpeople. Rust, the following week, preached to a settlement of freedmen 40 miles away in Johnson County. After a full month of preaching, Rust reported that the African Americans he preached to clamored for a church of their own.⁵

In the fall of 1876, Joseph Clarke and his wife relocated from Bowling Green, Ohio, to Texas, pitching their 12x16 tent on A.B. Rust's 200-acre property in Grand Prairie, 12 miles west of Dallas—specifically to educate freedpeople in the area. In March 1877, Clarke reported that two freedmen, G. M. Jordan and F. Jordan, had spent an evening arranging for a proper school building for freedpeople. Until its completion, Mrs. Clarke elected to teach the school in a tent.⁶

After considerable work by the Clarke and Rust teams between 1875 and 1877, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists finally called an ordained minister to serve Texas and build up a conference.⁷ In May 1877, Robert M. Kilgore and his family arrived from Iowa and began their work in the southern field.⁸ After eight years in Texas, Kilgore continued to serve elsewhere in the South, especially in Kentucky and Tennessee, as leader of the Southern District. In 1889, Kilgore and other ministers ordained Charles M. Kinny “to the work of the ministry among his own people,” after carefully considering the advice that it would not be safe for whites and Blacks to worship together in the South due to racial prejudice that dictated social culture.⁹

Black Adventists, in what would become the Southwest Region Conference, would go on to form their own congregations, beginning in 1890 at Corsicana, Texas.¹⁰ In 1892, Kinny organized a church in New Orleans, Louisiana, the only one of the several he founded in the 1890s that was located in the future territory of the Southwest Region Conference.¹¹

In 1901, Sidney Scott, a Black minister, reported that there were new converts in Catcher, Arkansas, who were members of a congregation called the Monarch Church. This church had previously observed Sunday but became a Sabbath-observing church through the work of Scott and S. S. Ryles, another Black minister.¹² In the same year, Houston, Texas welcomed a new Black congregation thanks to the work of two colporteurs, identified as Mrs. Pack and Mrs. Dysart.¹³

From the 1910s to 1940s, numerous Black congregations were added at locales throughout the territory that would eventually make up the Southwest Region Conference such as Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, Tyler, and Mosier Valley, Texas; Hot Springs, Pine Bluff, and Little Rock, Arkansas; Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Roswell, New Mexico.¹⁴ Additionally, throughout this period, Black schools opened in Corsicana, Texas, and in Oklahoma City.¹⁵

Organizational History

Between 1878 and 1909, churches primarily made up of Black congregants were under the administration of the all-white leadership of the conferences that developed in the Southwest. At the 1909 General Conference session, however, after nearly a decade of activism on the part of Black Adventist ministers, the North American Negro Department was formed to advance the Black work throughout the nation, similar to the departments formed to reach large European immigrant communities, primarily German and Scandinavian. The Southwestern Union Mission for Colored, established as part of the changes introduced with the new Negro Department, began operation in 1910. By 1917, local conferences within the Southwestern Union typically were using various entities such as departments, missions, or committees to administer the Black work in their respective territories. A union Negro Department was established in 1932. While experienced Black ministers were given varying measures of responsibility in these arrangements, white leaders held complete executive authority over them.

In 1946, organization of the Black work in the Southwestern Union altered dramatically with the creation of a regional mission—similar to the regional conferences (Allegheny, Lake Region, Northeastern, South Atlantic, and South Central) initiated in 1944-1945 across much of the nation. Under this new arrangement Black Adventists elected their own leaders who had the same decision-making authority regarding funds, personnel, evangelism, and all lines of conference endeavor as did leaders of the state conferences.

On December 16, 1946, at 10:00 a.m., the Black constituency held a meeting to organize on behalf of all of the Black churches in the Southwestern Union Conference. Unlike other regions with larger Black Adventist populations, the General Conference had not yet granted an approval for organization of a regional conference in the southwest because the Black Adventist membership was deemed too small to generate sufficient tithe income. With a unanimous vote by Black delegates, the Southwestern Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was established and pledged to begin its operations effective January 1, 1947.¹⁶ Comparable to a conference, the Southwestern Mission had its own officers, committees, departmental secretaries, and its own headquarters in a “small five-room frame house” at 3525 Havana Street in Dallas, Texas.¹⁷

During this period, the mission was home to approximately 1,700 members and its total net worth was \$35,824.

¹⁸ By 1949, the mission's office moved to 3711 Oakland Avenue in Dallas, Texas. Among the first officers chosen by the constituency were W. W. Fordham, chairman, religious liberty secretary, educational superintendent, and missionary volunteer secretary; V. L. Roberts, secretary-treasurer and Book and Bible house manager; J. H. Jones, publishing department secretary; and Helen Wiggan Beckett, Sabbath school secretary. Upon formal, voted acceptance into the Southwestern Union in February 1947 at the Southwestern Union Conference Session, Fordham also reported that there were 10 Black schools (with plans for at least one senior academy) with 167 students that were supervised by 13 teachers.¹⁹ The Mission, in this form, however, was short-lived.

According to W. W. Fordham's report at the second biennial session of the Southwestern Mission on January 17, 1950, Black Adventist membership had seen a net gain of 497 (from 1,584 in 1946 to 2,081 in 1950). Between

1947 and 1950, four new churches in Austin, Nacogdoches, Wichita Falls, and Lubbock, Texas, as well as small groups in Kenner and Covington, Louisiana, were added to the organization.²⁰ The 250 delegates representing 41 churches and small groups gathered at the Friendship Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, voted to dissolve the Southwestern Mission and organize as a full-fledged conference: the Southwest Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The new team included: W. W. Fordham, president and home missionary secretary; V. L. Roberts, secretary-treasurer and press secretary; O. Dunn, publishing secretary; C. C. Cunningham, educational superintendent and Sabbath school and Missionary Volunteer secretary; and H. Pettway, assistant Book and Bible House manager.²¹

In 1956, the conference office headquarters were moved from Oakland Avenue to a new site at 1900 South Boulevard in Dallas. This large complex, valued at \$130,000, also shared headquarters for City Temple Seventh-day Adventist Church and Southwest Region Academy, which became an academy in the fall of 1961 when 12th grade was added.²² In its first year of senior academy status, the school had 185 students.

Between 1950-1961, Southwest Region Conference (SWRC) added several new churches and the total membership increased to 3,169.²³ By 1965, this number grew to 3,700.²⁴ In 1968, the conference moved to its current Oak Cliff location at what was once called a “modern, air-conditioned building” at 2215 Lanark Avenue in Dallas.²⁵

In 1970, Southwest Region boasted 34 teachers, 8 schools, and 802 students for the 1969-1970 school year, alongside a membership of 4,898.²⁶ Notably, on May 16, 1971, the conference’s largest church, City Temple, opened its new doors after it was forced to move due to the city government’s decision to use eminent domain to raze the area for the completion of Interstate 45. The church and school, Southwest Region Academy, moved to a nine-acre tract in Oak Cliff, mere steps away from the conference office, which had moved only two years prior.²⁷

In March 1979, Southwest Region purchased a 268-acre campsite with a 25-acre lake for \$450,000 in Athens, Texas: Lone Star Camp.²⁸ By the end of 1979, Southwest Region had 62 churches with 7,330 members, with the largest growth (7.6%) of new Adventists in the entirety of the Southwestern Union.²⁹ Lone Star Camp has hosted camps for people with visual and hearing impairments, Pathfinder camporees, singles’ camps, elders and deacons retreats, winter Pathfinder camps, teacher and pastor retreats.³⁰ Since 1979, SWRC has continued to invest in its outdoor facilities, culminated by several new projects in the 2020s.

In the 1980s, Southwest Region continued to grow rapidly.³¹ This expansion was perhaps best exemplified by the way SWRC joined fellow conferences in the General Conference’s “Thousand Days of Reaping,” a world-wide evangelism approach with the goal of adding 1,000 new members per day over a 1,000-day period, culminating in one million new members joining the church before the General Conference session of 1985.³² In April 1982, Southwest Region opened its own Adventist Book Center (ABC), transferring all of its previous accounts from the Texas Conference.³³ By 1985, then-President W. C. Jones reported that in the previous year, 1,277 members

were added by baptism, a membership growth of 12%.³⁴ In 1986, Southwest Region pledged its support for the General Conference's "Harvest 90," a program aimed at doubling the successes of the One Thousand Days of Reaping. Southwest Region pledged to baptize 5,000 new members over a five-year period.³⁵ By 1990, Southwest Region had 12,823 members, an increase of nearly 1,700 in the five years since 1985.³⁶

Between 1990 and 2000, Southwest Region continued to grow, gaining over 20 new churches and nearly 8,000 new members during this decade.³⁷ Notably, an evangelistic effort, "Ebony Evangelism" in 1995 led to more than 1,700 new members baptized, the largest one-year total in Southwest Region up until that period.³⁸ By the new millennium, Southwest Region Conference boasted 18,523 members.

In the 21st century, Southwest Region has grown steadily. However, several churches and schools have closed over time. By the end of the 2000s, there were 23,574 members and by the end of the 2010s, there were 27,320 members. Between 2019 and 2022, Southwest Region baptized 3,459 new members.³⁹

Outlook

In 2021, Dr. Carlton P. Byrd, notable evangelist, former Breath of Life speaker and director, and former senior pastor of Oakwood University Church, was elected president of SWRC. Under his leadership, Southwest Region aims to dramatically expand Lone Star Camp, increase baptisms and tithe, plant new churches, produce religious television specials, and pursue its four-fold "Moving Southwest '4' Ward" plan, culminating in "The Dallas Project": a new conference office, K-12 academy, and church complex.⁴⁰

Southwest Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has remained true to its vision to primarily serve African Americans in the southwestern United States (New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana). In recent years, the conference has also supported a multicultural ministry, serving Hispanic and Latin American worshippers, alongside Haitians, various African nationalities, and Filipino communities. With their "Move Southwest '4' Ward" plan focusing on evangelism, education, media ministry, and youth and young adult ministries, the Southwest Region Conference is primed to continue its ultimate objective of preaching the tenets of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in all aspects throughout the region.

Presidents

Southwestern Mission: Walter W. Fordham, 1946-1950.

Southwest Region Conference: Walter W. Fordham, 1950-1954; Herman R. Murphy, 1954-1956; V.L. Roberts, 1956-1969; William J. Cleveland, 1969-1976; William C. Jones, Sr., 1976-1986; Richard E. Barron, 1986-1990; Robert L. Lister, 1990-2000; Billy E. Wright, 2000-2012; Samuel L. Green, 2012-2015; Calvin Watkins, 2015-2021; Carlton P. Byrd, 2021-

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NOTES

1. "Southwest Region Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=11285&highlight=Southwest|Region|Conference>.
2. E.G. Rust, "Letter from Texas," *ARH*, April 29, 1875, 142.
3. D.M. Canright, "Texas," *ARH*, May 25, 1876, 166.
4. Ibid.
5. A. B. Rust, "The Freedmen," *ARH*, August 3, 1876, 47.
6. Joseph Clarke, "Texas," *ARH*, March 8, 1877, 78; Joseph Clarke, "Texas: Deckman, Dallas Co.," *ARH*, March 22, 1877, 94. The building for the school was funded by local white citizens, but built by freedpeople. See also, Kevin M. Burtn, "Clarke, Joseph (1818–1908)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, August 29, 2020, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=A953>.
7. The Rust Brothers hoped for an "efficient" and "humble" minister to come to Texas. E. G. Rust, "Sabbath Meetings in Texas," *ARH*, June 8, 1876, 182 (the letter was written on May 28, 1876); There was a motion carried to suggest that Kilgore depart to Texas at the November 1876 General Conference Special Session, see: *ARH*, November 16, 1876, 156. Joseph and Mrs. Clarke taught at the school for freedpeople during

this time, see: Joseph Clarke, "Deckman, Dallas Co.," *ARH*, May 24, 1877, 166.

8. E. G. Rust, "Texas: Dallas," *ARH*, May 24, 1877, 166.
9. R. M. Kilgore, "Tennessee Camp-Meeting and Nashville Institute," *ARH*, October 29, 1889, 683. See also Delbert W. Baker, *Telling the Story*, 185, 188, 234.
10. W. C. Jones, "1946-1986: 40 Years of Progress," *Southwestern Union Record*, May 23, 1986, 8.
11. Trevor O'Reggio, "Kinny, Charles Marshall (1855-1951)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, February 26, 2022, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=CJFR>.
12. Sidney Scott, "Arkansas," *ARH*, October 22, 1901, 692. Ryles passed away just four years later of tuberculosis at the age of 42. He was the "only colored worker for [Arkansas]," according to W. H. Swait, "S.S. Ryles obituary," *ARH*, February 15, 1906, 23.
13. Jones, "1946-1986: 40 Years of Progress," 8.
14. Issue dates follow for *Southwestern Union Record* reports on the respective churches: Mosier Valley church located in the first all-Black community in Texas (September 25, 1917); Corsicana (December 2, 1919); Berean Church, Houston (March 22, 1921); Tulsa, Oklahoma (March 22, 1921); Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (May 16, 1922); San Antonio, Texas (October 24, 1922); Waco, Texas (December 18, 1923); Beaumont, Texas (May 20, 1931); Texarkana, Arkansas (December 2, 1931); Pine Bluff, Arkansas (September 28, 1932); Tyler, Texas (November 23, 1932); Hot Springs, Arkansas and New Orleans, Louisiana (March 7, 1935); Roswell, New Mexico (December 11, 1935. Many more subsequently added.
15. There was a longtime Corsicana Mission School operating in the 1910s and a school operating in Oklahoma City by 1935; see *Southwestern Union Record*, April 3, 1935, 3.
16. J. C. Kozel, "Southwestern Mission," *Southwestern Union Record*, January 15, 1947, 2.
17. "New Office Headquarters," *North American Informant*, November-December 1969, 4.
18. Robert Lister, "Southwest Region Conference: How It All Began," *Southwestern Union Record*, May 1, 1994, 2.
19. "Superintendent's Report: Schools and Teachers," *Southwestern Union Record*, February 19, 1947, 24.
20. W. W. Fordham, "President's Report," *Southwestern Union Record*, January 25, 1950, 6.
21. "W. W. Fordham, Newly Elected President, Southwest Region Conference, Renders Mission Report at Session, January 17, 1950, *North American Informant*, March 1950, 1-3.

22. J. E. Meredith, "The Treasurer Reports," *North American Informant*, January-February 1962, 4 (according to 2013dollars.com, \$130,000 in 1956 would be valued at \$1,466,065.44 in 2024); Ruth Paschal, "Southwest Region Academy: Our First Year," *Southwestern Union Record*, August 8, 1922, 13.
23. On churches added in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Elgin, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; Houston, Texas; Port Arthur, Texas; Little Rock, Arkansas; Lake Charles, Louisiana; Tyler, Texas; Marshall, Texas; Texarkana, Texas; Dallas, Texas; and Wichita Falls, Texas; see Meredith, "The Treasurer Reports," 4.
24. "North American Regional Department: 1964 Statistical Report," *North American Informant*, May-June 1965, 8.
25. "New Office Headquarters," 4.
26. W. J. Cleveland, "Southwest Region," *North American Informant*, May-June 1970, 5.
27. "Southwest Region," *North American Informant*, September-October 1971, 4.
28. Doris Jones, "Southwest Region Conference Held Its 33rd Annual Camp Meeting," *North American Regional Voice*, August 1979, 17, 18.
29. Bill May, "A Report to the People," *Southwestern Union Record*, February 21, 1980, 12E.
30. See reports in *Southwestern Union Record*: July 24, 1980; August 7, 1980; December 11, 1980; January 8, 1981; October 29, 1981; September 2, 1982; March 29, 1984; and October 25, 1984.
31. W.C. Jones, "1980 Sees Five New Churches Organized in Southwest Region," *Southwestern Union Record*, February 5, 1981, 7. In the Southwest Region Conference Constituency Report, conference president W.C. Jones reported that over the last five years (1976-1981): 10 churches were added, as well as 11 new church buildings at different churches; tithe receipts totaled \$6,771,820.90, Sabbath School offerings \$486,843.02, Ingathering \$458,325.00; and nine church schools were added with an enrollment of 1,000; *Southwestern Union Record*, March 5, 1981. In 1983, Southwest Region reported 744 baptisms for the year by October, already doubling their record of 375 from the previous year, and by the end of August conference had a \$1.5 million tithe, the highest gain in the entire union (see *Southwestern Union Record*, October 27, 1983, 4, 9).
32. LaVerne Beeler, "Conferences Make Plans for Thousand Days of Reaping," *Southwestern Union Record*, August 19, 1982, 9.
33. W. C. Jones, "Southwest Region Opens Book Center," *Southwestern Union Record*, March 3, 1984. The Southwest Region ABC began operation through mail orders in April 1982, operated its first camp meeting book center in June 1983, moved to its new headquarters on the first floor of the Southwest Region Conference building in December 1983, and held its official opening and ribbon cutting ceremony in January 1984.
34. W. C. Jones, "Report to the People," *Southwestern Union Record*, March 14, 1985, 12H.

35. Doris Jones, "1200 Baptized During 1,000 Days," *Southwestern Union Record*, March 14, 1986, 13.
36. "Southwest Region Conference Yearly Statistics (1980-1990)," accessed January 17, 2024,
https://adventiststatistics.org/stats_y_stats.asp?FieldID=C10473&view=y_stats&StartYear=1980&EndYear=1990&submit=Build%2BTable.
37. "Southwest Region Conference Yearly Statistics (1990-2000)," accessed January 17, 2024,
https://adventiststatistics.org/stats_y_stats.asp?FieldID=C10473&view=y_stats&StartYear=1990&EndYear=2000&submit=Build%2BTable.
38. Evelyn M. Edwards, "Officers and staff are reelected for another term of office," *Southwestern Union Record*, July 1, 1997, 25.
39. "Fifth Quadrennial and 26th Constituency Session," *Southwest Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, September 2023, 13.
40. Carlton P. Byrd, "Southwest Region Conference: Moving Southwest '4' Ward eNewsletter," January 18, 2024. On February 22, 2024, the conference property at 2215 Lanark Avenue in Dallas was sold. The conference office is currently housed in a leased space, see Carlton P. Byrd, "Southwest Region Conference: Moving Southwest '4' Ward eNewsletter," February 27, 2024.

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