

Banfield, Warren St. Clair (1922–2006)

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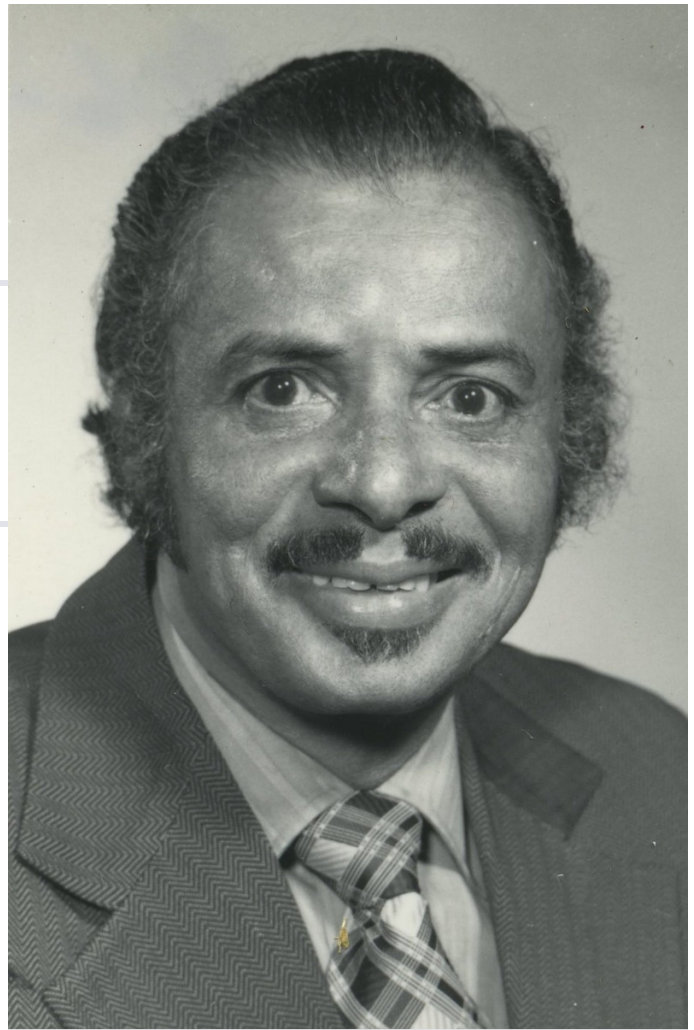
Warren St. Clair Banfield was a prominent black Seventh-day Adventist minister, church administrator, and civil rights activist.

Early Life, Marriage, and Education

Warren Banfield was born on April 16, 1922, in Charleston, West Virginia, to Michael St. Clair Banfield (1892–1985) and Edna Madeline Williams (1896–1996). Michael was a Seventh-day Adventist minister, and Edna was a homemaker. The couple had four children, of which Warren was the eldest. The family moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where Warren spent most of his childhood.¹

From 1942 to 1943 Warren attended Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama. He continued his studies at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, earning a bachelor's degree in theology in 1946. That year Banfield became a pastoral intern with the South Atlantic Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. In 1949 and 1950 he pursued advanced studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.² On January 1, 1950, Warren married Gerri Poole in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. They had two children: Warren St. Clair, II and Karren.

Career



Warren St. Clair Banfield
Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day
Adventists Archives.

In 1951 Banfield became an ordained minister with the South Atlantic Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. From 1956 to 1962 he pastored the Mount Calvary Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tampa, Florida, and was a member of the city's Black Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. During this time Banfield was actively involved in efforts to improve the economic and sociopolitical status of Tampa's African American community. Prior to his arrival the city's public facilities (parks, schools, libraries, beaches, restaurants, movie theaters, bus and railroad terminals, water fountains, and restrooms) were all racially segregated. In 1957 and 1958 he served as president of the Tampa National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Moreover, he chaired the Tampa Urban League's Industrial Relations Committee—charged with finding employment opportunities for black residents. Banfield's involvement in sociopolitical activism drew criticism from several Adventists (particularly those who viewed matters of social justice as mere political issues, rather than moral ones). Despite the opposition of some Adventists, John H. Wagner, Sr. (1902–1962), president of the South Atlantic Conference, supported and thoroughly encouraged Banfield's work in the area of social justice. As a community leader and activist, Banfield kept the city's political leaders abreast of civil rights concerns. Consequently, he set the city's civil rights agenda, raised funds, planned community meetings, and organized demonstrations. By the end of 1958, after a year of sit-ins, wage-ins, boycotts, and a lawsuit against the city (which the municipality lost), the segregation of Tampa's public facilities ended. In recognition of his sociopolitical activism, on behalf of the African American community, he received the NAACP Frontiers of America Community Service Award in 1959 and 1963.³

Banfield was elected president of the South Atlantic Conference in 1962, serving in that capacity until 1971. His administration put a high priority on evangelism and church growth. During Banfield's tenure the conference experienced significant growth.⁴

From 1971 to 1975 Warren served as the associate secretary of the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. In 1975 he relocated to Washington, D.C. taking up an appointment as the associate director of the Office of Regional Affairs within the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He continued in this capacity until 1978. Throughout the 1970s, as the membership of blacks within Adventism grew, there was no reciprocal growth of black representation within the higher administrative levels of the Adventist Church. Consequently, some African American Adventist leaders pushed for the creation of black regional union conferences within the denomination's administrative system. Banfield opposed this. He saw the civil rights movement as a fight for integration. In his opinion the push for black regional union conferences was a departure from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of the complete integration of American society, and a return to racial separatism. Furthermore, he reasoned that the plethora of existing union conferences would eventually provide job opportunities for African Americans, as the trend toward ethnic diversity increased within the denomination's North American Division (NAD).⁵

In 1978 Warren suggested that the NAD create a department to address social problems within the church, such as racial and cultural conflicts, employer and employee problems, and issues related to the role of women in the church. Adventist officials agreed, and the NAD Office of Human Relations came into being, with Banfield as its first director. Under his guidance the office created workshops and seminars for better racial and cultural understanding, and put forward a systematic plan to address matters of race within Adventism. To increase interracial dialogue, the plan proposed exchanging pulpits (black ministers preaching in white churches and vice versa). It also promoted opportunities for minority leadership in church administration, particularly at the union conference level. Moreover, it aimed to remove barriers that prevented nonwhites from attending Adventist schools. Banfield and his associates witnessed gradual improvements in these areas. Nevertheless, the underlying issues (greed, prejudice, ignorance, fear, and miscommunication) contributing to these social and economic inequalities within the church still linger to this day. As director of the NAD Office of Human Relations, Banfield was a member of the committee that formulated the denomination's doctrinal manifesto titled "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," approved by the General Conference in 1980. During the committee's deliberations Warren pointed out that the book did not contain a statement on Christian fellowship or race relations. He argued for the inclusion of a doctrine based on the apostle Paul's statements advocating unity and equality among Christians, regardless of ethnicity or gender. The result was doctrinal point 13, "Unity in the Body of Christ." This Adventist doctrine states: "In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation." Banfield headed the NAD Office of Human Relations until his retirement in 1989.⁶

Final Years and Contribution

Following his retirement Warren moved to Los Angeles, California, and later relocated to Huntsville, Alabama. In Huntsville he served on the board of directors of the Interfaith Mission Service—an organization dedicated to religious, racial, and cultural harmony and service in response to human need. On July 16, 2006, Warren St. Clair Banfield died of cancer in Huntsville, Alabama. He was 84 years old.⁷

As a minister, administrator, and activist, Banfield not only brought attention to social injustices within the church and mainstream society, but developed a stratagem—based on Christian sensitivity, dialogue, and compassion—to address these issues effectively. An outgrowth of his work within the NAD Office of Human Relations was the creation and development of the NAD Women’s Commission in 1984, which ultimately became in 1990 the Women’s Ministries departments of the NAD and General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. These departments give voice and representation to Adventist women within the denomination’s organizational structure. This was an accomplishment of which he was extremely pleased.⁸

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. 1930 United States Census, Baltimore County, Maryland, enumeration district 0264, digital image, “Banfield, Michael St. Clair,” Ancestry.com, accessed October 1, 2017, <http://ancestry.com>; Newark, New Jersey, Petition for Naturalization no. 82980 (1943), Michael St. Clair Banfield, Court of the United States of Newark, New Jersey.?
2. Samuel G. London, Jr., *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 136.?
3. *Ibid.*, 136, 137.?
4. *Ibid.* “Warren S. Banfield (1962–1971),” accessed September 27, 2017, Homemadegospel.org, http://homemadegospel.org/?page_id=4296.?
5. London, 139; Dwain Neilson Esmond, “In the Crossfire: The Ministry of Warren S. Banfield,” *ARH*, February 2002, accessed September 27, 2017, <http://archives.adventistreview.org/2002-1506/story1.html>.?
6. *Ibid.*; “Interview With Elder Warren Banfield,” North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, April 30, 1988, accessed September 28, 2017, https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/1626405/person/-826560111/media/c94e926f-4166-4eb4-a32e-a484b43f538d?_phsrc=qXZ403&usePUBJs=true.?
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8. Esmond, “In the Crossfire: The Ministry of Warren S. Banfield.”?

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