

Bergherm, William Howard (1897–1963)

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Sabrina Riley was born in Auburn, New York and raised in Dowagiac, Michigan. She received a B.A. in history from Andrews University and an M.A. in information and libraries studies from the University of Michigan. Riley was a member of Andrews University's library staff from 1998 to 2003, library director and college archivist at Union College from 2003 to 2016, and is presently a freelance researcher, author, and information professional.

William H. Bergherm was an Adventist evangelist, pastor, and administrator. He was the second Adventist minister to become a commissioned chaplain in the United States Army during World War II.

Early Life

Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, United States, on December 7, 1897, William Howard Bergherm was the fourth of William Herman Bergherm's (1862-1943) and Martha M. Heidenreich's (1864-1936) five children. He had two older brothers, Julius Fred (1888-1972), and Walter Alfred (1890-1987), one older sister, Helen M. (1893-1913), and a younger brother, Paul (1901-1979). His father was a grocer and both parents were of German descent. Walter Alfred also became a minister who served the Adventist Church in three divisions: North America, Inter-America, and South America.

Education and Family

Bergherm attended Beechwood Academy in Fairland, Indiana, where he was the 1915 Junior class president.¹ He graduated from Emmanuel Missionary College's two-year ministerial course in 1919, followed by a bachelor's



W. H. Bergherm with wife Frances and son, 1930s.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

degree in 1921. In 1950 he completed a Master of Arts in Bible and systematic theology from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.²

Bergherm married Frances Ammon (1895-1971) in 1919, a graduate of Emmanuel Missionary College's teachers training course. She was the daughter of Ashford D. Ammon (1868-1900) and Nora Fenner (1868-1936). The Bergherms had three children: William Howard, Jr. (1923-2009), who managed Adventist Book Centers in several conferences, Elizabeth (Betty) Belle (1928-2010), and Bruce Allen (1932-2012), who became an anesthesiologist.³

Literature Evangelist

Bergherm possessed an "appetite for adventure"⁴ that served him well throughout his career, making him bold where others might hesitate. While in school, Bergherm spent summers colporteur in the Indiana⁵ and the East Michigan conferences⁶ to earn his tuition. He was successful in this work, both financially and evangelistically. During the summer of 1917 in 125 hours of door-to-door contacts, he collected orders totaling \$467.25.⁷

Beginning in the June 1919 through early 1920, Bergherm assisted B. J. White with evangelistic meetings in Crawfordsville, Indiana.⁸ Between 1921 and 1924,⁹ Bergherm worked for the East Michigan Conference, starting with efforts in Lansing, Michigan, where he worked beside Frank Dudley.¹⁰ He organized a Sabbath School at Walled Lake in the East Michigan Conference in March 1922.¹¹ While selling the book *Christ's Object Lessons* in Detroit in the autumn of 1922, Bergherm was invited to attend a Baptist convention and allowed time to present his merchandise. He sold about twenty copies of the book.¹²

Despite his success as a literature evangelist, in early 1923 the East Michigan Conference removed him from door-to-door canvassing to enable him to preach evangelistic series.¹³ Assigned to Flint, Michigan, and "assisted by Elder and Mrs. George B. Sterling, and Miss J. Leola Roger," Bergherm's evangelistic work resulted in the baptism of twenty-two people by the end of the summer.¹⁴ He was ordained on March 15, 1924, during Lake Union Conference meetings held in Chicago, Illinois.¹⁵ His ordination was followed by a call to the Philippines.¹⁶

Philippines

In the Philippines, the Bergherm family established a home in the city of Iloilo, where W. H. Bergherm served as director of the West Visayan Mission. The mission prospered under his leadership. In Bergherm's first year as director, 700 people were baptized and the church membership growing by 55.6 percent. He instituted the practice of not baptizing a person until they had started paying tithe. This enabled the mission to increase its level of self-support.¹⁷ Frederick Griggs, visiting the Bergherms' at the mission's headquarters in Iloilo, found "their mission home. . . a very comfortable one with beautiful grounds. They are very happy in their work, which as I have said is very prosperous."¹⁸ In 1925-1926, the mission constructed eight church buildings and baptized

507 people.¹⁹ Under Bergherm's leadership, in 1928 the West Visayan Mission entered Romblon Island.²⁰ All told, Bergherm served the West Visayan Mission as director, and sometimes simultaneously as treasurer, from 1924 to 1930.²¹ Frances Bergherm at times served as assistant treasurer, bookkeeper, and Sabbath school secretary.²²

During furlough in 1930, Bergherm represented the Philippine Union Mission as a regular delegate at the General Conference Session in San Francisco, California.²³ On the Bergherm's return trip to the Philippines, they were joined on the *Empress of Russia*, sailing from Vancouver on June 26, 1930, by fellow missionaries H. W. Klaser and Fordyce Detamore and their families. Klaser would be joining Bergherm in the Philippine Union. Detamore was headed to Singapore.²⁴

Once again in the Philippines, Bergherm served as home missionary secretary for the Philippine Union, a position he held until he permanently left the country in 1935.²⁵ In this role, Bergherm frequently traveled through the Philippines, supporting Sabbath School and other personal evangelism efforts. He was also a week of prayer speaker at Philippine Union College in 1934.²⁶ Shortly thereafter, he requested permanent return home due to his wife's health.

Associate Home Secretary and Columbia-Venezuela Union Mission

Upon the Bergherm family's permanent return to the United States in 1935, the family settled in Takoma Park, Maryland. In April 1935, Bergherm attended the General Conference's Spring Council, which elected him associate secretary of the home missionary department. In this role, Bergherm traveled extensively across the United States speaking at camp meetings and other events.²⁷ As a missionary he had regularly contributed news to the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*; he now began publishing devotional and pastoral articles related to personal evangelism.²⁸

After six years at the General Conference,²⁹ Bergherm accepted a call to become president of the Columbia-Venezuela Union Mission in August 1941.³⁰ His family was unable to join him due to their daughter's ill health, and he returned to the United States in December 1942. Consequently, his brother, W. A. Bergherm, replaced him as leader of the Columbia-Venezuela Union Mission.³¹ W. H. Bergherm briefly pastored the Blythedale, Maryland, Seventh-day Adventist Church.³²

Military Chaplain

Seventh-day Adventist ministers joining the military as chaplains was controversial at the beginning of World War II. Fearing it was a conflict of interest between church and state and that the requirements of the military and government would curtail Adventist chaplains' ability to preach the Adventist message, the General Conference, in the spring of 1942, strongly discouraged ministers from joining the military as chaplains. A year later, it tempered its language to make commissions as military chaplains a personal matter of conscience.³³

Although his reasons for desiring to become an army chaplain are unknown, Bergherm applied for the army chaplaincy on January 13, 1943. The application required an ecclesiastical endorsement from the General Conference, one it was not willing to give. Instead, this requirement was circumvented by Carlyle B. Haynes, who provided a personal endorsement based on his own knowledge of Bergherm. The General Committee on Army and Navy Chaplains, which vetted Protestant ministers entering chaplaincy in the United States military, accepted this personal endorsement. This made Bergherm the second Adventist chaplain commissioned by the army during World War II, Floyd E. Bresee being the first.³⁴

Bergherm's first duty station was on a troop transport ship in the Pacific. This was followed by assignment to the 47th General Hospital, also known as Hammond General Hospital, which had been originally organized by the College of Medical Evangelists (now Loma Linda University) physicians at White Memorial Hospital as a Reserve Medical Corps unit. It had the distinction of being commanded nearly entirely by alumni and personnel from CME, although by this time most of its enlisted personnel were not Adventist.³⁵ With the 47th General Hospital, Bergherm went to Papua New Guinea, where true to his background in personal evangelism, he continued outreach to both soldiers and local civilians.³⁶

In 1945, Bergherm was released from duty by the army, and then promptly recalled in December 1946. During the intervening months, he studied at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary in Takoma Park. After reentering the army, he was assigned to Germany. He permanently separated from the army in 1950.

Later Career

Returning to the General Conference in 1950, Bergherm became secretary of the International Service Organization.³⁷ In this capacity, he traveled the world in support of Adventist military service personnel serving their home nations. In Germany he organized the first Seventh-day Adventist Bible conference for service personnel in 1952.³⁸ This became an annual event, later meeting at the United States Army's Bavarian retreat center, the Alpine Inn at Berchtesgaden. The concept was also implemented in other parts of the world including Korea and Japan.³⁹ Bergherm was also instrumental in the establishment of a retreat center in Frankfurt, Germany, for Adventist service personnel.⁴⁰ When the International Service Organization and the National Service Organization merged in 1954, he was made an associate secretary.⁴¹ Bergherm retired from the General Conference in 1958.⁴²

While traveling the world in support of Adventist service personnel, Bergherm had collected many stories of providential intervention in their lives, conversion experiences while in the military, and the contributions various soldiers made. He published a compilation of these stories in 1959 in a volume called *No Greater Glory*.⁴³

Following his retirement, the Bergherms relocated to Sonora, California. Bergherm accepted a part time position with the California Youth Authority as a chaplain at the Fricot Boys' School. He also served as a member of the

Sonora Community Hospital Board.⁴⁴

Death and Legacy

Known “as a large-hearted, understanding father,”⁴⁵ Bergherm was fatally injured in an automobile accident on December 15, 1963, enroute to work at the Fricot Boys’ School. Because he was ill but still insisted on going to work, his wife was driving in foggy, slippery conditions when she lost control. She survived with no injuries. Bergherm lingered in a coma for two weeks before dying on December 31, 1963.⁴⁶ He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.⁴⁷

Bergherm’s career was distinguished by several firsts. He was the first (and at the time of writing only) General Conference departmental secretary to serve as a chaplain in the armed forces. He was also the first Adventist minister to be employed by the government as a chaplain of a correctional facility. While serving as secretary of the International Servicemen’s Organization, he founded the magazine, *For God and Country*, currently published by Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries. Finally, Bergherm initiated the concept of spiritual retreats for service personnel, which regularly met in Germany, Japan, and Korea for many years.⁴⁸

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