Rodgers, Peter Gustavus (1885–1961)

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Peter Gustavus Rodgers
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Peter Gustavus Rodgers, evangelist and pastor, was one of Adventism's most effective spokespersons in America's black urban communities during the first four decades of the twentieth century and a leading voice in the struggle for black equality within the church.

Early Life and Marriage

His father, William B. Rodgers (ca. 1834-1911), was a Caribbean-born mariner. In 1860, William Rodgers married Mary Catharine Sockum (ca. 1840-1915) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he settled and labored as a "furniture car driver" and teamster. The last of the Rodgers' eight children, Peter Gustavus, was born in Philadelphia on August 10, 1885.[1] Gustavus (the given name he preferred as an adult) completed high school in the Philadelphia public schools, learned carpentry, and, in 1906, married Alverta Durham (1883-1942) of Dover, Delaware.[2]

Though identified as "black" in America's binary scheme of racial categorization, both Gustavus and Alverta Rodgers were fair-skinned. His father, William, is identified as a "mulatto" in the 1870 United States Census and both his mother's family, the Sockums, and his wife's, the Durhams, were among the "principal families" of a Delaware-based people of ambiguous racial heritage known as "the Moors."[3] The couple's light complexion sometimes confused people. When, for example, they arrived in Los Angeles to begin a new pastoral assignment in 1923, congregants initially reacted with surprise, thinking that the conference had sent a white man to be their minister.[4]

Conversion and Early Ministry

Gustavus Rodgers was the sole convert resulting from meetings that fellow "Moor" Fred H. Seeney conducted in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1908.[5] The tall, slender, 23-year-old carpenter quickly devoted himself to gospel work, assisting Seeney on a self-supporting basis. The Virginia Conference hired Rodgers to assist Leslie Muntz as tentmaster and organist for evangelistic meetings held in Norfolk during the summer of 1909.[6]

In June 1910, Rodgers accepted a call to full-time ministry in the Chesapeake Conference. For the next year and a half he assisted Fred Seeney evangelizing in Delaware (Dover and Wilmington) and Maryland (Baltimore and Chestertown).

Baltimore (1911-1918)

Adventist evangelization of black communities in the nation's large cities gradually began to gain momentum during the first decade of the twentieth century. In Baltimore, with a black population then close to 90,000, second in the nation only to Washington, DC, the earliest black Adventist congregation (Baltimore No. 3) did not appear until 1906. When the Chesapeake Conference assigned Rodgers to Baltimore full-time in 1911, he found the church "in a half-wrecked condition" with "the members scattered" and the Adventist cause in poor repute in the surrounding community.[7] When Rodgers's pastorate at Baltimore Third Church concluded six years later, the membership had grown from 11 to 300, a church building had been acquired and renovated with over 75% of the mortgage paid, and a thriving church school established.[8]

By March 1912, Rodgers had secured a home for his small flock–the 200-seat Young's Auditorium, well-located "among the very best colored people of this city" at Druid Hills Avenue and Robert Street.[9] Steady growth in small increments during the first two years raised the membership past fifty by the beginning of 1914, a year that would bring major breakthroughs.[10]

The evangelistic campaign Rodgers held that summer led to a far greater infusion of new members than ever before–fifty-five, thereby doubling the Baltimore Third church membership. The church acquired the building it had been renting, dedicated it on October 17, 1914, and improved it by adding a gallery that increased the seating capacity by 100, installed steam heat in its well-used baptistery, and invited the public in to a building "cooled by electricity" during the summer.[11] With abundant evidence confirming his ministerial calling, Gustavus P. Rodgers was ordained at the Baltimore Third church the following spring with conference president M. C. Kirkendall and F. H. Seeney conducting the service.[12]

Relentless evangelism characterized Rodgers's entire ministerial career. He preached evangelistic sermons on Sunday nights throughout the year, in addition to the series of nightly meetings extending through much of the summer. He preached forthright Adventist doctrinal sermons that hit hard against teachings popular among other denominations while at the same time cultivating positive interdenominational relationships within the black community.

It was also in 1914 that black churches of other denominations in Baltimore–mainly African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion–began welcoming Rodgers and Baltimore Third members into their spaces to sing and speak. The Bethel A.M.E. church invited the public to "hear the silver-tongued orator and sweet singer, Elder G. P. Ro[d]gers" who would be bringing his choir and congregation with him on Sunday afternoon, November 1, 1914.[13] The church news and advertisement pages of the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper indicate that Rodgers, often accompanied by the choir, eventually spoke at a minimum of five different AME churches from 1914 through 1917, at some more than once.

At the Big Zion AME church on October 14, 1917, Rodgers preached for the Sunday morning service on "Where Did the Black Man Come From?" touted as his "famous sermon."[14] Rodgers, thus, succeeded in part by adapting the presentation of the Adventist message to the African American cultural context. "Many openings come to us to present the message in the Methodist Churches, and at present we have an invitation to preach February, 1918, in one of the largest churches in the city," Rodgers informed readers of the *Columbia Union Visitor*.[15]

Equal Opportunity for Christian Education

Appreciation of Rodgers's contribution to Adventist history requires seeing it in the context of the formative conflicts and divisions over racial injustice that unfolded in the Church during the decades of his ministry. Of the many facets of that problem, one of the most critical was access to Christian education–a central component in the Adventist way of life. It had been the most decisive factor in the decision of the People's Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington, District of Columbia (DC), by far Adventism's largest predominantly black congregation at the time, to withdraw from the denomination in 1907. Exclusion from the new Washington Training College (1904) and Washington Sanitarium (1907) nearby in Takoma Park, Maryland, combined with the lack of tangible action toward development of separate black institutions, prompted the congregation's move to organizational independence.[16]

Fallout from the People's church saga, and the questions of denominational loyalty and racial equality it involved, swirled around Rodgers's ministry in nearby Baltimore. Reconciliation between the denomination and the People's church in 1913 broke down less than three years later in 1916, due to lack of progress on, once again, the central issue of equal opportunity for Christian education. It was at that juncture that Rodgers took the lead among black Adventists who remained firm in their loyalty to the denomination but equally determined to realize what the People's church had sought for more than a decade without success: "a northern training center for colored youth."[17] In this context "northern" extended into Maryland and the District of Columbia because for black Adventists in the territories of the Columbia and Atlantic Unions, the main need was for an alternative much closer to home than Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama, hundreds of miles away in the segregated and impoverished Deep South.

Rodgers's proposal that such a school be started in Baltimore was considered along with other ideas at a meeting of the North American Division Conference Committee (NADCC) in July 1916.[18] The renewed turmoil involving the People's church in Washington and the departure of another leading black evangelist, John W. Manns, based in Savannah, Georgia, earlier that year to create a separate black denomination, the Free Seventh Day Adventists, disposed the NADCC to at least give the matter a hearing. Along with two other black ministers–J. Marion Campbell, then briefly located in Washington, DC, and James K. Humphrey of New York City–Rodgers was included in discussions on July 11 about "what should be done for the colored people to hold them in the truth" in view of the

recent instances of “disaffection.”[19]

The NADCC proved unwilling in 1916 to support the vision of an alternative to Oakwood for the mid-Atlantic and northeast regions. But the council did recommend appropriation of modest sums to help develop local church schools for black students, starting with $300 for a school based in Rodgers' Baltimore Third church, to be matched by both the Columbia Union and Chesapeake Conference.[20]

While far short of what Rodgers sought, the $900 did help the school get off to a strong start in the fall of 1916, offering eight grades with seventy-three students, three full-time teachers, and three part-time teachers. Rodgers gave it the aspirational name Chesapeake Industrial School, envisioning rapid advance to fourteen grades and a dormitory for boarding students, thus meeting the need for “a school of merit where colored workers could be trained as ministers, teachers, Bible workers and for whatever line of Gospel work they would be efficient.”[21] Though these particular aspirations were not realized, the school was an impressive start toward fulfillment of a dream that would persist over the following decades despite repeated setbacks.

In February 1918, in the midst of the school's second year, Rodgers left Baltimore for a new assignment in Washington, DC. Though “loath to leave,” he could do so claiming that both the church and the school were “in excellent working condition.”[22]

Also, in his supervisory role over the black churches in the Chesapeake Conference, Rodgers emerged as a persuasive voice for the interests of the African American work within the church. His frequent and skillfully-written reports for church periodicals were filled with impressive facts and figures showing progress despite limited means, while making the case for devoting greater resources to the African American work.

“I ask the brethren who read this article to become burdened for these people,” he concluded one such article. “We need better school equipment, church buildings, tent companies, etc…The Cushite is to be among the remnant (Isa. 11:11), and when he takes his place in this message, he will be faithful to his vows to God and assist mightily in giving the message to those of other races.”[23] In summarizing the outcomes of his tenure at Baltimore Third church, he made sure to include the fact that “colored believers” now comprised more than one-third of the Chesapeake Conference membership.[24]

Washington, District of Columbia

The second and final withdrawal from the denomination by the People's church in 1916 brought to conclusion a fifteen-year drama in which exhilarating advances for the Adventist cause in Washington, DC, were set back by sharp conflict and division over the color line. A substantial minority who wished to remain connected to the Seventh-day Adventist organization in turn withdrew from the again-independent People's church to form a new, thirty-seven-member congregation that took the name “Ephesus.”[25] To house the loyal group, and to redress another long-standing inequity that had driven racial conflict, the General Conference arranged acquisition of a formerly Lutheran Reformed church building located at Sixth and N Streets, Northwest, though the congregation was left with responsibility for over one-third of the debt.[26]

The racial situation in Washington had thus been stabilized, leaving the denomination with two small-to-medium sized black congregations–Ephesus and the formerly “mixed race” First Church. Rodgers was called to Ephesus because his track record in Baltimore gave hope for renewed dynamism to recover lost ground and advance further.

Rodgers began his new assignment with recognition that the black believers “here in this center” had “suffered so many fearful experiences.” And, as an energetic young pastor with large dreams and multiple skills with which to realize them, the choice between the racial independence represented by charismatic leaders such as Sheafe and Manns, on the one hand, and loyalty to “the organized work” under white leadership, on the other, had not been an easy one. But for Rodgers and his new congregation, the matter had been settled: “[W]e have placed our hands to the plow, this time, never to look back,” he declared. His goal was “to see the work here solid and forever on the move.” *Solid*–that is, unchanging in its Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and identity. For Rodgers, though, loyalty meant neither passivity nor blind submission. So, the work was also to be *forever on the move* toward fulfillment of its primary mission to people of African descent, and in overcoming the challenges they would face–both within the denomination and without. His call for prayer that “throughout the entire country the work for the colored people may be pushed with every advantage” signaled a determination to do all in his power toward that end.[27]

As he had in Baltimore, but now more so, Rodgers focused his evangelism in Washington D.C., on the city's large black middle class that enjoyed the advantages of a relatively good educational system and employment opportunities. “To reach these progressive people requires progressive methods in tent and church activities,” he wrote in 1919. Rodgers regarded “a spacious modern church property” in itself as one of the “progressive methods” needed to break down barriers to reaching black Washingtonians. He put his carpentry skills into action, making “church repairs with his own hands.” When repairs and improvements–including a steam-heated baptistery and enhancements to the pipe organ–were completed in the summer of 1919, Rodgers proudly proclaimed that the Ephesus church now ranked “among the most modern and beautiful of our houses of worship.”[28]

When it came to progressive methods in “tent” or evangelistic activity, Rodgers used the special lecture he had originated in Baltimore at the outset of ministry in Washington to show that he and the movement he represented had something of importance to say about the dilemmas specific to the African American experience. “The Colored Man as the Bible Reveals Him,” with the subtitle, “His past, present and what the future holds in store for him,” drew

favorable public attention during the month prior to the opening of Rodgers' first tent series in Washington in 1918.

A short article in the June 8 edition of the *Washington Bee*, the influential – and at that point the only – black-owned newspaper in the nation's capital, informed readers that Rodgers had "made the Bible history of the colored man his deep study" and opined that "for cheer and encouragement there is nothing better for the race to hear than this sermon."[29] Two weeks after he presented it at Ephesus, he was invited to deliver it again at the Central Methodist Episcopal church located just a block away on Fifth Street.[30] The positive responses gained Rodgers a hearing at black America's leading cultural and intellectual forum, the Bethel Literary and Historical Society, where he spoke on November 26, 1918, on "The Black Man as God Sees Him, or the Inspired History of the Negro." A glance at some of the other lecturers during Bethel Literary's 1918-1919 season illumines the significance of Rodgers' appearance. These included: Rev. Reverdy C. Ransom of Chicago, one of the era's most influential black ministers at the national level; two of the greatest leaders in all of African American history, A. Philip Randolph and W.E.B. Du Bois; and Rodgers's estranged cross-town colleague, Lewis C. Sheafe.[31]

The presentations on the black race in the story of redemption helped stir interest in hearing more of Rodgers's expositions on the Bible delivered at the "Big Gospel Tent" on Sherman Avenue during the summers of 1918, 1919, and 1920. Forty new believers came into the church in connection with the 1919 campaign, joining the sixty already added since Rodgers's arrival. During the 1920 meetings, Rodgers noted the gratifying presence of "an entirely new company" at the nightly meetings, including college professors, lawyers, and other professionals.[32]

A baptism of twenty-eight new believers influenced by the Sherman Avenue meetings on December 5, 1920, included three individuals who epitomized the kind of church that Ephesus was becoming through Rodgers's formative leadership: Willie Anna Dodson, on her way to a path-breaking career as a public school administrator; her husband, Joseph T. Dodson, an entrepreneur with an intellectual bent; and Eva Beatrice Dykes, about to become the first female of her race to complete PhD requirements, later a professor at Howard University and then Oakwood College.[33] All three would be spiritual pillars of the Ephesus congregation and agents for denomination-wide change during the 1940s as part of the Committee for the Advancement of the Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists.[34]

In Washington, Rodgers took up the zealous drive he began in Baltimore to extend opportunity for full realization of Adventist educational ideals to African Americans. The church school that Ephesus began in 1917 expanded to nine grades in 1920, with three well-credentialed teachers. The tenth grade was added the next year (1921-1922).[35] Rodgers had his sights set even higher, as he had in Baltimore, on the kind of school that would provide black students throughout the eastern United States the advanced training needed to take up positions along all lines in the Adventist cause. In a letter to Eva B. Dykes in 1929, he said that since 1916 he had "tried to beg the men at Washington, actually begged them" for the help needed, but "to no avail."[36]

After Rodgers accepted a call to California in 1923, the *Washington Tribune* aptly summarized his five years of ministry in the city: "Elder Rodgers's departure has brought gloom to both friends and members alike for his hard work, untiring zeal and winsome personality has done much to build up the cause in the Seventh Day Adventist Church here."[37] Long-time Ephesus members who knew and worked with Rodgers later credited him with establishing "unusual inter-racial, inter-denominational and pastoral relations" in the Washington community. He did this, not in spite of but, through aggressive evangelism conducted in a way that "not only won many souls but friends as well in the Nation's Capital."[38]

In 1918, he had been assigned a small congregation that had only just established its footing after years of recurring controversy and division. Five years later, with the addition of 216 new believers, the membership was approaching 300.[39] The church school had been strengthened into a ten-grade junior academy. He left Ephesus much stronger not only in numbers but in the character that would make it a powerful center for both the expansion and shaping of African American Seventh-day Adventism and a catalyst for stirring the entire Adventist movement toward closer alignment of its practices with the principles of "the everlasting gospel" it proclaimed.

Los Angeles

Rather than a tiny barely alive church (Baltimore) or a church born in divisive conflict (Washington, DC), the challenge Rodgers took on in Los Angeles, California, in 1923 was to lead a church that was already a success to higher ground. In 1908, the East 36th Street church, originally named Furlong Tract, had been the first black Adventist church organized west of Kansas City, Missouri. The congregation had come into being through the innovative ministry of Bible instructor and medical missionary Jennie Ireland. It included numerous dedicated, high-achieving members, and several of the young people who came of age in this fellowship would make notable contributions in both church and society such as evangelist and church leader Owen A. Troy, pioneering public health advocate Dr. Ruth J. Temple, and educator and author Arna Bontemps, prominent in the Harlem Renaissance.[40] When the congregation moved to a new building on East 36th Street in 1922, it had a relatively strong membership of ninety-nine, but that was about the same as it had been a decade before. Adventism was barely touching the booming black population of Los Angeles.

In the summer of 1924, Rodgers set up the 1,000-seat Big Gospel Tent on Central Avenue in the heart of the black community for three months of evangelistic meetings. This would become an annual, summer-long happening for most of the next fifteen years. The 1924 campaign drew near-capacity crowds on Sunday nights and 400-600 people on weeknights, including sizable contingents of white people. The church membership doubled to 200 as a result, making it clear already that a larger church building would be necessary.[41]

On the corner of 35th Street and Wadsworth Avenue in Los Angeles, Rodgers's vision of a quality church building as a critical element of evangelism received fuller implementation than ever. The *California Eagle* newspaper described the new 800-seat church, completed in the summer of 1927, as "one of the finest churches in the city." With music also a top priority, a "beautiful alcove" behind the pulpit accommodated a Moller pipe organ along with the church's large choir that, according to the *Eagle*, was "known far and wide in the city for the artistic nature of its work." Once again, Rodgers, along with other church members, joined in the construction work to help keep costs down. Less than two years later, on March 2, 1929, the 300-member church held a "note-burning service" to celebrate final payment on the debt.[42]

Rodgers honed his method of drawing crowds with "thrilling sermons" that framed Adventism's end-time warning message in issues of current public interest, sometimes of particular interest to black listeners. In July 1936, for example, with European dictators stirring widespread anxieties about another world war and Italian aggression in Ethiopia arousing particularly concerned interest from African Americans, a large headline in the *California Eagle* announced, "Elder Ro[d]gers to Discuss Ethiopian Situation." That discussion apparently was to be part of a broader presentation under the title announced for the July 28 meeting, "Can Just Four Angels Hold in Check the Hatred of the Nations?" Rodgers now made heavy use of slides, and for this topic he promised that close to "four score marvelous and beautiful pictures will be thrown on the big screen." Music was always a major part of the meetings' appeal, and those in attendance on July 28 could look forward to the Strickland sacred orchestra rendering several special numbers during "the big song service."[43]

Perhaps aware that some readers might be skeptical about his frequent reports of large baptisms, Rodgers gave an informative though imprecise explanation in 1929. He loosely estimated that he had baptized "between four and five hundred" during his first five years in southern California. If all had joined the Wadsworth church, its membership by then should have been between 500 and 600 rather than the reported 300. What accounted for the gap of 200-300? Rodgers stated that "scores" had gone to live in other states. "Many" had passed away. Finally, he acknowledged that "nearly 80 have left the truth-–which grieves us more than anything else."[44]

Despite these factors, the number who stayed continued upward, reaching 500 in 1935.[45] And most of them, according to Rodgers, were highly involved in the church's mission. He liked to call Wadsworth a "real seven day church" and claimed that the majority of members gathered at the church for some form of worship, training or service "every night or day during the week."[46] When the summer tent meetings were not running, the church typically held evangelistic services on Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday nights, with the Tuesday meetings sometimes taking the form of a "visitors' round table Bible class."[47]

The Great Depression tested Wadsworth's mettle as a seven-day church. As of November 1933, 60% of the members were unemployed with no prospects in sight, according to G. A. Roberts, president of the Southern California Conference. Yet, despite their economic distress, Roberts reported that 96% of them were paying tithe–a rate higher than more than half of the other congregations in the conference–in addition to remarkable generosity with mission offerings. Two hundred members had set up a Benevolent Association Fund to assist the sick and cover funeral expenses for families in need. "When we consider the faithfulness and loyalty of this church to the closing gospel work, it is evident that the spirit of grace has sown deep and sure the blessed hope of everlasting life in these hearts," Roberts concluded.[48]

In 1936, with the Depression easing slightly, a long-standing need was met when the Wadsworth School opened with sixty-eight students in eight grades. Two years later, it had become a junior academy with an enrollment of 112.[49]

As he had elsewhere, Rodgers fostered strong ties with black community leaders in Los Angeles, such as NAACP officials and Charlotta A. Bass, influential publisher-editor of the *California Eagle* newspaper. Along with Loren Miller, an attorney and city editor of another black newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Rodgers was one of the featured speakers at a forum in January 1935 on how President Franklin D. Roosevelt's economic recovery program affected African Americans, addressing "the religious aspects of the New Deal."[50]

Beyond his pastoral and nearly non-stop evangelistic work at Wadsworth, Rodgers was also placed in charge of the "colored work" not only in southern California, but in scattered locales throughout the territory of the Pacific Union. In 1928, for example, he conducted a three-week evangelistic series in Salt Lake City, Utah, to build up the small Liberty Park congregation.[51]

Rodgers served on the Southern California Conference executive committee from 1927 to 1937, and was frequently a featured speaker at camp meetings and other conference-wide gatherings.[52] He also lent his preaching and the music of his renowned choir, for which he appropriated the name Jubilee Singers, in support of the efforts of leading white evangelists, such as H.M.S. Richards, Sr., and Philip Knox. An advertisement for Knox's 1930 "Chautauqua" in Riverside, California, announced that the series would open with "Dr. P. G. Rodgers And His FIFTY COLORED JUBILEE SINGERS" who would give the city "One of the Greatest Musical Treats in Its History."[53]

During his California years, Rodgers continued to be a leading and sometimes controversial voice for the development of Adventism's African American work and against the structural disparities that hindered it. He was

appointed to a Council for Colored Workers whose proposal for "Negro conferences" in several unions, including the Pacific, met with emphatic rejection from the General Conference leadership the following year.[54]

Rodgers continued to press for equal educational opportunity in the church though. He served on the General Conference Commission on Negro Work in 1931 that approved a plan for the long-sought "school in the North" for black youth.[55] Unfortunately, the plan set up for funding the project proved unworkable.

In 1938, restrictions on placement opportunities for black interns by the College of Medical Evangelists (CME) in nearby Loma Linda drew vociferous protest from Rodgers. The preacher thought he had mediated a solution that satisfied both the NAACP and the General Conference administration, but was outraged when the CME board voted a change to the wording of the policy in a way that, he contended, changed nothing in actuality. He warned General Conference treasurer W. E. Nelson that the NAACP would not let the matter go and declared that the only reason he could imagine for such a "regrettable action" was that "the spirit of a doomed world is getting into the hearts of the leaders of Israel." The preacher urged a change so that nothing would be done "that will retard the acceptation of the Gospel by the colored people for whom CHRIST died–and over whom Angels must surely weep when they see them shunned…and their minds made to wonder if the entire set-up of pretended interest in them is not one grand colossal mockery."[56]

Controversial Retirement

Rodgers' outspokenness on racial matters apparently made some church leaders feel uneasy about his loyalty to denominational organization. This was particularly so after conflict with the Greater New York Conference administration led to the ouster of another leading black minister, J. K. Humphrey, in 1930, and his subsequent formation of the rival United Sabbath Day Adventist denomination.[57] Yet, at least two of Rodgers's conference presidents in Southern California went on record firmly defending his loyalty. In addition to G. A. Roberts, cited above, P. E. Brodersen reported in 1931 to J. L. McElhany, then vice president of the General Conference for North America, that "Brother Rodgers, to all appearances, is giving most loyal support to our work." With a light touch of sarcasm, Brodersen added: "It does seem strange, Brother McElhany, that the Wadsworth church should be so liberal with its funds, if they have in mind any disloyalty to the cause."[58]

Nonetheless, wariness on the part of some church leaders about Rodgers and his influence with the black Adventist membership was among a complex set of factors that brought his full-time ministry to a premature end at age 55 in 1940. By that time he had been at Wadsworth for seventeen years–an unusually long pastoral tenure even in twenty-first century Adventism and virtually unheard of then. As one General Conference administrator put it, the basic concern about Rodgers was that "he was a man who has drawn very strongly to himself." Though he was not accused of any specific wrongdoing, they were suspicious of his personal control over a church of 500 members and its finances.[59]

The fact that Rodgers had earned a chiropractic degree since moving to Los Angeles and was supplementing his ministerial income with his practice in that field was another source of controversy. The majority of his members saw the continued success of his evangelistic and pastoral work as evidence that his work as a chiropractor did not detract from his ministry, and in some ways enhanced it, given Adventism's emphasis on health. Some, however, began to voice objections that resonated with the concerns of church administrators who believed that salaried ministers should devote their full time to gospel work.[60]

One solution would have been for Rodgers to accept a call elsewhere. But he had resisted doing so because his wife, Alverta, suffered from a respiratory condition that the southern California climate made more tolerable. And Rodgers was having some health difficulties of his own, suffering periodic attacks of severe abdominal pain that caused him to fall over.[61]

The health problems turned out to be the administrative solution. Though Rodgers initially resisted the idea sharply, he finally acquiesced to acting conference president W. M. Adams's proposal that he give up his pulpit, for the time being at least, and accept sustentation due to disability. A physician's diagnosis duly confirmed that Rodgers suffered from an inflamed gall bladder and possibly a stomach ulcer such that he would be unable to work for at least six months to a year.[62]

The depth of admiration for Rodgers in the Wadsworth congregation made it difficult for many to accept the pressured retirement of their much-loved pastor. After F. L. Peterson arrived in September 1940 as the church's new, conference-assigned pastor, division threatened as one group began meeting with Rodgers in his home on Thursday evenings. Feeling unjustly treated, he did not discourage their support, and the group laid plans to start a radio broadcast. However, the group gradually diminished and no breakaway movement formed under Rodgers's leadership.[63]

Alverta Rodgers's health worsened in 1941 due to "heart trouble," and she died on June 16, 1942. Though her role went almost completely unmentioned in public reports, she had been an active and indispensable partner in her husband's ministry from the beginning more than thirty years before. Her role had been "praying while he preached, distributing and selling our gospel filled literature, [and] rendering help to the needy members of the churches." She had been particularly active in support of the church schools that they had built up in all three of the major cities where they had served. The couple had no biological children but early in their marriage they had taken responsibility for the education of three children, all of whom became public school teachers in New Jersey.[64] Elder Rodgers subsequently remarried. Details about his second wife, Evelyn B. Rodgers, remain elusive.

P. G. Rodgers never returned to full-time ministry, though he did preach occasionally. On a February weekend in 1945, for example, while F. L. Peterson was still pastor, he preached the Sabbath morning and Sunday evening evangelistic sermons at Wadsworth–evidence that the rifts surrounding his sidelining in 1940 had been overcome.[65] Similarly, in 1951, he preached twice at the Philadelphian Seventh-day Adventist church in San Francisco, pastored by Jeter E. Cox.[66]

In 1959, though, Rodgers put up for sale his collection of "3,000 color stereopticon slides" along with a "Bausch and Lomb dissolving lens machine" that he had used in leading 1,008 individuals to baptism during his time in California.[67] His public ministry was over. Looking back from 1960, despite his persistent agitation for racial justice in the church and the pain surrounding his early retirement, he regarded himself as having been in the ministry for the entire 51 years since 1909. "I have loved every phase of the Message during these years and have never doubted one line of it," he testified.[68]

After a long illness, Rodgers died at a rest home in La Mesa, California, on September 24, 1961, at age 76.[69] Six ministers whom he had won to Adventism were at his funeral service along with "hosts of old parishioners and friends," according to his widow.[70]

Contribution

P. Gustavus Rodgers was both a powerful evangelist and a personable congregation-builder, a visionary promoter and a pragmatic leader skilled in bringing dreams to reality. He spearheaded development of a thriving African American Adventist presence in the cities of Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles during the first half of the twentieth century. In each city, he began his pastorate with a fledgling congregation of less than a hundred members that, by the time he left, had multiplied to several hundred, occupying newly-constructed or renovated facilities, and expanding educational opportunity for black young people with a new or upgraded school.

"Solid" in his devotion to the Adventist cause, Rodgers was also "forever on the move," tirelessly advancing the mission of the church and urging it toward a more Christ-like pattern of race relations in ways that sometimes disturbed the status quo.

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5. Reynolds, 177.?
6. "Peter Gustavus Rodgers obituary," *ARH*, November 30, 1961, 22; Sustentation Fund Application, GCA, Sustentation Files, RG 33, Box 9774, Peter Gustavus Rodgers; Leslie Muntz, "Norfolk," *Columbia Union Visitor*, October 20, 1909, 6.?
7. Gustavus P. Rodgers, "Baltimore, Md.," *Columbia Union Visitor*, March 6, 1912, 4.?
8. Gustavus P. Rodgers, "The Work Among the Colored People in the Chesapeake Conference," *ARH*, February 21, 1918, 17.?
9. Rodgers, "Baltimore, Md." Weekly listings giving the address of the church, sermon titles, and brief mention of special programs began appearing in the "Church Notices" section of city's major black newspaper, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, in 1913.?
10. Gustavus P. Rodgers, "Baltimore," *Columbia Union Visitor*, September 23, 1914, 5.?
11. Gustavus P. Rodgers, "Baltimore," *Columbia Union Visitor*, November 11, 1914, 4 and March 25, 1915, 2-3; "Church Notices," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 13, 1914, 5.?
12. "Chesapeake News Notes," *Columbia Union Visit*or, May 20, 1915, 6. Census and other public records indicate that "Peter Gustavus Rodgers" was the legal name of the individual who is the subject of this article. For the first several years of his ministry, he identified himself as Gustavus P. Rodgers or G. P. Rodgers. Advertisements for the evangelistic meetings on Sherman Avenue began to identify him as P. Gustavus Rodgers in 1919 (for example in *Washington Evening Star*, August 2, 1919, 9). The September 16, 1920 article referenced earlier in this note is one of, if not the first article in print with "P. Gustavus" as the given name. After some inconsistency, from 1923 forward, coinciding with his move to California, either P. Gustavus Rodgers or P. G. Rodgers was usually used.?
13. "Bethel A.M.E. Church," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 24, 1914, 4.?
14. Church listings in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 6, 1917, 3 and October 13, 1917, 4.?
15. Gustavus P. Rodgers, "The Work Among the Colored People in Baltimore," *Columbia Union Visitor*, August 23, 1917, 3.?
16. Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Associaton, 2010), 279-311.?
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18. North American Division Conference Executive Committee, July 11, 1916, 380-381, General Conference Archives, accessed September 18, 2019, http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/NAD/NAD1916-07.pdf.?
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20. Ibid., 386-387.?
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25.

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29. "God's History of the Negro," *Washington Bee*, June 8, 1918, 4.?

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32. Gustavus P. Rodgers, "Tent Work for the Colored People in Washington, D.C.," *Review and Herald*, September 11, 1919, 22; P. Gustavus Rodgers, "Colored Work in the District of Columbia Conference," *Columbia Union Visitor*, September 16, 1920), 3.?

33. DeWitt S. Williams, *She Fulfilled the Impossible Dream: The Story of Eva B. Dykes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), 31-32.?

34. Rock, 46-47.?

35. Rodgers, "Report of the Work Among the Colored People of Washington, D.C."?

36. Quoted in Williams, 62.?

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41. Mrs. A.H. Baker, "East Thirty-sixth Street Church," *Pacific Union Recorder*, September 11, 1924, 3.?

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45. W.E. Howell, "Our Colored Church in Los Angeles," *ARH*, July 25, 1935, 19.?

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