

Frame, Robert Ronald (1915–2012)

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Gilbert M. Valentine, Ph.D. has served internationally in teaching and senior administrative roles in Adventist higher education in Europe, Asia, the South Pacific and North America. He has written extensively in Adventist studies and has authored several books, including biographies of *W. W. Prescott* (2005) and *J. N. Andrews* (2019). *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) explored the political influence of Ellen White. He has also written for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013).

A multi-talented church leader, Robert R. Frame gave forty-seven years of service to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the latter half of the twentieth century. He held leadership roles in local conference and mission administration at union and division levels in what is now the South Pacific Division. He also worked at the General Conference and, for the last nine years of his ministry, served as president of the church's unified Adventist Media Center at Thousand Oaks, California.



Robert Frame, c. 1945.

Photo courtesy of South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

Background and Early Life (1915-1935)

Robert Ronald Frame, known to close friends as Bob, was born near Tamworth, New South Wales, on November 23, 1915, to Thomas Dixon Frame (1882-1916) and Ada Margaret Cameron (1881-1966).¹ He was the youngest of three siblings, which included a brother, Colin, and a sister, Olive. Frame's Scottish great grandparents, John William Frame and Sarah Hamilton immigrated to Australia in 1853, eventually settling on a grazing property, "Paradise Station," at Inverell on the northern tablelands of New South Wales. Raised on the farm at Inverell, in 1909, Robert's father, Thomas, married Ada Margaret, the daughter of another farming family from Tingha, twenty miles southwest of Inverell. Shortly after their marriage the couple settled in the railway hamlet of Duri, just southwest of Tamworth.²

Calamity struck the family in 1916 when Thomas Frame died of typhoid fever on May 26, before Robert Frame was six months old.³ Subsequently, Frame and his siblings were raised by their widowed mother who never remarried. In 1919, Frame's mother attended evangelistic meetings in Tamworth conducted by M. H. Whittaker and was baptized. Frame was four years of age when he began attending the local Adventist church with his mother and older siblings.⁴

After completing elementary school Frame proceeded to attend Tamworth High School, established in 1919 in South Tamworth.⁵ This school enjoyed a generous acreage with many large playing fields and an emphasis on sport. In 1932, Frame left home to attend the Australian Missionary College in Cooranbong, New South Wales, where he registered as an industrial student for the three-year Business Certificate course, which apparently also included some ministerial or religion studies. Unexpected funding from an American aunt was deemed providential and helped make college study possible.⁶ Unsuccessful completion of a difficult business subject in the last year of his studies prevented Frame from graduating.⁷

Early Career (1936-1954)

In 1936, Frame spent twelve months in colporteur work in the South New South Wales Conference.⁸ At the commencement of the next year, he was offered a clerical appointment in the treasury office of the Australasian Union Conference in Wahroonga where he held the role of cashier. In Wahroonga, he had the opportunity to nurture a courtship with Peggie Jean Watson who had grown up in the Wahroonga community and to whom the congregation felt especially attached.⁹ Pastor L. C. Naden conducted the wedding for the couple in the Wahroonga church on November 8, 1938. Ten days later the newlyweds left Sydney on board the *MV Bulolo* bound for Rabaul in Papua New Guinea where twenty-three-year old Frame had been appointed secretary-treasurer of the Papua Mission.¹⁰ On December 21, 1940, the couple welcomed their first child, Judith Anne, born in Port Moresby. Severe malaria during Peggie's pregnancy resulted in lifelong complications for her daughter who remained dependent on her parents.

Although church leaders anticipated difficulties as the Japanese military advanced in the Pacific during World War II, when the attacks began they came with "remarkable swiftness." When Port Moresby and other towns suffered aerial bombardment in February 1942, Peggie Frame and Judith, along with other missionaries, were evacuated to Australia. Sometime later, Frame, with a number of other remaining missionaries, sailed a small mission boat back to the safety of the homeland.¹¹ Frame was temporarily assigned work in the Sanitarium Health Food retail shop in Hunter Street, central Sydney.¹² However, By the end of the year he had been reassigned to the treasury department at the Australasian Union Conference in Wahroonga, where for the next five years he held the position of assistant treasurer.

At the annual meeting of the Australasian Union Conference Committee held in Wahroonga at the end of September 1947, church leaders took action to divide the mission work in Papua New Guinea to enable "better

supervision” of the field. The islands in the Bismark Archipeligo were separated administratively from mainland New Guinea and two organizations were created out of the one. Frame was appointed superintendent of the newly-organized Papua-Northeast New Guinea Mission with its headquarters in Port Moresby. He took up his new duties at the beginning of 1948 implementing changes focused on establishing the new administration. However, a year later Judy’s health necessitated a return to Sydney and new responsibilities.¹³

At a special session of the Australian Union Conference in August 1948, church leaders took action to restructure the organization of the rapidly growing Church in the South Pacific. Australia and New Zealand were divided into two new union conferences and the pacific nations mission field into two new mission unions. The former Australasian Union Conference became known as the Australasian Inter-Union Conference.¹⁴ After the plan was approved by the General Conference annual council in October, another special meeting of the Australian Union was called at Avondale December 2-12 in order to organize and staff the new union organizations. The new entities took effect on January 1, 1949. At the December 1948 meetings, Robert Frame was recalled from the mission field to serve as the first secretary-treasurer of the new Trans-Tasman Union Conference with its headquarters established in Gordon, a northern suburb of Sydney. The new union conference embraced the two New Zealand Conferences (North and South Islands), Greater Sydney, (an urban conference carved out of the territory of the South New South Wales Conference at the end of 1948), North New South Wales, Queensland and the North Queensland Mission. Frame’s role involved forming policies and procedures for the new structure and helping to establish its identity. Frame held this role for the next six years. During Frame’s first year back in Sydney, the couple adopted a son, Peter Robert, born on June 14, 1949.¹⁵

Division and General Conference Administrator (1954-1976)

At the Australasian Inter-Union Division annual meetings at Avondale College on November 22-29, 1954, a new post of assistant secretary for the division was created in order to keep up with the growing administrative tasks associated with the rapidly expanding mission field. Frame was appointed to the new role and at the same time recommended for ordination to gospel ministry.¹⁶ He was ordained at a service in Wahroonga on February 2, 1955.¹⁷ Frame served the division as assistant secretary for six-and-a-half years.

Because of increasing ill-health in early 1962, Division President F. G. Clifford announced just prior to the May 1962 General Conference Session in San Francisco, that he intended to retire from leadership.¹⁸ To replace him that year, delegates chose Laurence C. Naden, the former division secretary as president and they appointed Robert Frame secretary alongside Naden. The role also involved overseeing the editorial function for the *Australasian Record*. Four years later, at the next General Conference session held in Detroit, Michigan, in June 1966, Frame was elected associate secretary of the General Conference. He moved to Washington, DC in July of that year to join President Robert Pierson’s new administration. Frame worked directly under W. R. Beach, the General Conference secretary. Frame’s particular responsibilities focused on “working policy, correspondence

and placement of missionaries and other workers,” for both the Australasian and the Northern European Divisions.¹⁹ The opportunity to travel more widely and to work with church leaders from across the globe broadened Frame’s networks.

When L. C. Naden retired as Australasian Division president in July 1970 at the Atlanta General Conference session after eight years as leader, Robert Frame was elected president.²⁰ He moved back to Sydney and served in the role with distinction for a period of six-and-a-half-years. Theological ferment over the doctrine of righteousness by faith absorbed much of Frame’s administrative attention. What had begun during Naden’s term in office as an agitation by Robert Brinsmead over an idiosyncratic teaching on sinless perfectionism, morphed in the 1970s into an intense debate over the theological and practical implications of the doctrine of justification by faith. Conservative elements in the church reacting to changing theological emphases in the church became critical of social and cultural changes impacting the Avondale College campus. Retired ministers calling themselves “the Concerned Brethren” protested the strong reformation perspective on soteriology advocated by Avondale theology lecturer, Desmond Ford. Frame defended both Avondale and its theological faculty pointing out to General Conference President Pierson that Ford had been “completely misrepresented” and that his administrative colleagues regarded the attacks as “defamatory.”²¹ During 1975, Frame protested the perfectionism being advocated by the *Review* and at other colleges in America and, in early 1976, convened a meeting of the Australian Biblical Research Institute to hear the critics and their charges against Ford and Avondale. Frame later recalled Ford being a “Christian Gentleman,” presenting a “great demonstrating of godliness” even as he was “verbally abused” by his “super critics.”²² Believing that the debate was more than “merely a matter of semantics,” Frame persuaded the General Conference to convene a major international conference on soteriology. Convened at Palmdale, California, in April 1976, the conference affirmed the biblical understanding of righteousness by faith taught by Ford and his Avondale colleagues. It was not successful, however, in diminishing the intensity of the theological debate in the church.

During Frame’s tenure as president, which involved him serving as board chairman at Avondale, the college successfully achieved Australian government accreditation for its courses. This enabled it to better serve the expanding church school system in both the homeland and the mission field. Frame’s leadership in the division also required him to serve as the chair of the board of the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital in Wahroonga. Between 1971 and 1973, he oversaw the successful rebuilding of the Sydney Sanitarium as a modern 350-bed acute care institution and the official changing of its name to Sydney Adventist Hospital, although it was still fondly referred to as ‘the San’ Hospital.

Media Center Leadership (1977-1985)

At the General Conference annual council held at the end of 1976, Frame was persuaded to accept an invitation to become the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Radio, Television and Film Center operated by the

General Conference at Newbury Park, California. Leadership colleagues in Australia had appreciated Frame's distinctive approach that had "generated a spirit of togetherness," and they lamented his departure. There had been no gap between "rhetoric and reality" in his administration. *Record* Editor Bob Parr had more somber forebodings about what Frame's departure would mean for the division.²³ Frame returned to the United States in January of 1977 and settled in Thousand Oaks, north of Los Angeles, California.²⁴

In 1972, the General Conference had established the Adventist Radio, Television and Film Center in Newbury Park, California, in an attempt to achieve efficiency through the common use of high cost studio facilities. Financial advantages were also perceived in the coordination of common organizational functions and consolidated approaches to the purchasing of equipment and airtime. With Alvin Munson as the founding president, two prominent General Conference-funded outreach ministries had moved to the new location. Both, the *It is Written* telecast, with speaker George Vandeman, previously headquartered at the General Conference in Washington, DC, and the New York-based *Faith for Today* telecast with William Fagal as speaker, had moved to California when the center was started. In 1974, the newly established *Breath of Life* telecast with presenter C. D. Brooks located in Glendale, California, had also moved to Newbury Park.²⁵ Some ministries, fearing the loss of identity of their programs or a loss of independence, were reluctant to move; thus, the vision of a fully integrated approach to the church's media outreach programs still remained incomplete by the time Munson retired in late 1976. Frame's task was to complete the transitions. According to Dale Bidwell who served with Frame as vice president for finance beginning in 1980, the vision of "centralized accounting, centralized computer services and centralized studio planning" provided distinctive challenges.²⁶

Eighteen months after becoming president, Frame saw the *Voice of Prophecy* program with H. M. S. Richards, Jr. as speaker relocate, albeit reluctantly, to the Newbury Park Center followed shortly afterwards by the Spanish program *Le Voz de la Esperanza*. Ultimately, approximately one hundred and eighty personnel comprised the combined workforce under Frame. Media programs by nature employed highly creative individuals, musicians, and people with specialized technical skills. The leadership task also required distinctive management skills. According to Bidwell, Frame's "diplomatic skill, expertise and grace" in leadership achieved a unity that worked effectively in spite of occasional tensions between programs. Dan Matthews, whom Frame called as a speaker/presenter to lead *Faith for Today* in 1980, and who later successfully launched the innovative *Christian Lifestyle Magazine* program, especially appreciated the "bold support" Frame gave to him in dealing with church executives in Washington and at other particularly difficult financial times. Frame understood the industry and "was a great listener," Matthews observed. He was "an amazing father figure" who nurtured the creative gifts in others and he exercised great skill in smoothing "troubled waters."²⁷ Besides overseeing the completion of the television and radio buildings and the coordinating of support services, during his presidency of the church's unified media program, Frame nurtured the broadening of the church's electronic outreach through new formats and the use of satellites for transmitting both television and radio programs.²⁸

Retirement (1985-2012)

At the end of 1985, Frame retired from full-time employment and, because of family circumstances, elected to remain in the United States rather than return to Australia. The Frames settled in Henderson, North Carolina, with their daughter Judy living nearby in the same retirement complex. Frame continued to be involved in his local congregation and with those with whom he had worked in previous years.²⁹ He lived next door to Fred and Renie Veltman in Hendersonville. The Frame's found pleasure in extending hospitality to former colleagues and friends, such as the Matthews and Bidwell families, who occasionally visited them and also helped keep them apprised of developments in the Church. In 1998, the couple visited Australia to celebrate their sixtieth wedding anniversary with family in Sydney.³⁰

Robert Frame died on November 5, 2012, two weeks shy of his ninety-seventh birthday and was interred at Hendersonville, North Carolina.³¹

Legacy

Robert Frame was known for his warm, affirming personality and for nurturing the spirit of "togetherness" in church community life and leadership. He was a gifted administrator and his steady, reliable leadership in new organizational entities such as new missions, new union organizations, and new ministry ventures, such as the church's media organization in California, contributed significantly to the growth and development of the Church. His leadership of the Church in the South Pacific during the 1970s, a time of theological ferment, was marked by strong efforts to maintain community, a sense of fairness, and a concern for ensuring the Church's continuing commitment to the preaching of the Gospel.

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NOTES

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2. The 1930 Australian electoral roll gives his mother's address as 15 Railway Street, Duri, Tamworth. *Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903-1908*, "Ada Margaret Frame," Ancestry.com, 2010, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://search.ancestry.com/>.

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4. R. H. Abbott, "Ada Margaret Frame obituary," *Australasian Record*, January 9, 1967, 7.
5. If he attended the Duri Public School, it was less than a 20 minute walk from his home on Railway Street.
6. "Life Sketch of Robert Frame."
7. Frame notes the failure to graduate in the biographical information in his personnel file. "Robert Ronald Frame: Biographical Information Blank, 1941."
8. Ibid.
9. She "seems to belong to us," wrote Editor Reuben E. Hare in his report on the special farewell service the church organized for the couple. "Farewell," *Australasian Record*, December 5, 1942, 3.
10. L. C. Naden, "Frame-Watson marriage," *Australasian Record*, December 12, 1938, 7.
11. Australasian Union Conference Officers, "Our Missionaries as Affected by the War in the Western Pacific," *Australasian Record*, February 2, 1942, 8; "Life Sketch of Robert Frame."
12. H. E. Piper, "Our Missionaries," *Australasian Record*, March 30, 1942, 8. See also, R. R. Frame, "Carrying on in Papua," *Australasian Record*, November 9, 1942, 3.
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21. R. R. Frame, Letter to R. H. Pierson, July 12, 1976, held in the personal collection of the author.
22. R. R. Frame, letter to D. Ford, April 4, 2009, held in the personal collection of the author. Frame defended Ford on numerous occasions against what he considered unwarranted criticism.
23. R. H. Parr to Desmond Ford, October 18, 1976. Parr saw the departure as "tragic news."
24. R. H. Parr, "Farewell to the President," *Australasian Record*, January 24, 1977, 1.
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27. Daniel Matthews email to author, May 26, 2019.
28. "Pastor R. R. Frame Retires," *Australasian Record*, February 8, 1986, 10.
29. Dale Bidwell, email message to author, May 26, 2019; Dale Bidwell to Rodney Brady, January 20, 2014, private letter, personal collection of the author.
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