

Johanson, Johan Peter Marius (1860–1928)

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Shirley Tarburton, M.Litt. (Distinction) (University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia) retired in 2008 after 40 years teaching church-school (mainly high school but including eight years at university). An Australian, she has taught in four mission fields, Australia, and New Zealand. She has authored five books and co-authored one on church history, biography and family history, as well as several magazine articles. She is married to Dr. Michael Tarburton with two adult children and four grandchildren.

Pastor Johan Johanson held a range of pastoral and administrative positions in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Australia, including manager of the Signs Publishing Company; principal of the Australasian Missionary College; president of union missions in Japan, Korea, and Manchuria; and manager of the Australasian Conference Association.

Early Life and Marriage

Johan Peter Marius Johanson (generally referred to as J. M. in adulthood) was born on November 24, 1860, in Faaborg, Denmark,¹ to Mathias Maurmann (1811–1876)² and Karen Marie (Pedersen) Johansen (1821–1889).³ He was the youngest of 10 children and the only surviving son.⁴ After receiving a good education, he trained as a cabinetmaker and then left Denmark to travel.⁵ When he was about 26, he met Faith Omer in London, and they married in Greenwich, London, early in 1888.⁶ Their first child, Mabel Faith Muriel, was born December 6, 1888, in Lambeth, London⁷ (d. November 28, 1974, in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia).⁸

Faith was born in London, January 27, 1866, the only child of her parents, Henry Omer and Faith Hardcastle,⁹ who had married the year before.¹⁰ Her father, a painter and decorator,¹¹ died when Faith was only 10.¹² Her



Johan and Faith Johanson

Photo courtesy of Shirley Tarburton.

mother married again, and when Faith was 15, a little sister was born, Edith Omer Longley³ (1880–1980). Two years later, another little sister joined the family, Grace Amy Longley.¹⁴ After being widowed a second time, Faith's mother married Josiah Weeden just over a year before Faith and Johan Peter Marius Johanson married.¹⁵

Immigration and Affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church

In 1890 the Johansons decided to immigrate to Tasmania, Australia. On the journey, to pass the time, they did a lot of reading, which aroused their interest in the second coming of Christ.¹⁶ This led to Johanson feeling uneasy, and he "expressed himself as longing for a deeper spiritual experience and wanting something but not knowing what it was."¹⁷

After settling in Launceston, Tasmania, Johanson saw in a friend's home a copy of the book *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* by Ellen G. White. He borrowed it, read it avidly, and decided from his reading that he had been keeping the wrong day for the Sabbath. However, on obtaining no satisfaction from discussing the problem with Christian friends, he decided to study it out for himself in the Bible.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Faith's mother and her family had also immigrated to Launceston, arriving a week or so¹⁹ after the birth of the Johansons' first son, Walter Omer, born May 19, 1891²⁰ (d. December 5, 1934).²¹ Aware of Johanson's search, Faith's mother told him of a book, *Daniel and the Revelation* by Uriah Smith, that she had been lent by Mrs. Estelle V. Rogers, a Seventh-day Baptist neighbor who also later became a Seventh-day Adventist. Upon reading this book, Johanson was jubilant and said, "I have found what I have been looking for at last."²² The family kept the very next Sabbath, unaware that there was a church that held to the two precepts of the Second Coming and the Seventh-day Sabbath that they now held so dear.²³

Faith tells how they first heard of Seventh-day Adventists a short time later, when one of their Christian friends said to her husband, "Whatever you do, don't join the Seventh-day Adventists."

"Seventh-day Adventists," he repeated. "What sort of people are they?" The friend replied, "They keep the Sabbath, pay tithe, and are looking for the coming of the Lord." My husband exclaimed, "Why! they are the very people we are looking for. Tell me where we can find them."²⁴

There was a church company in Launceston,²⁵ and Johanson soon sought it out. The first SDA minister they met was Pastor Robert Hare.²⁶ They accepted each facet of doctrine that was presented to them, and on learning of the opening of a Bible Training School in Melbourne in August 1892,²⁷ Johanson sold his cabinetmaking business and moved his family to Melbourne so that he could attend and "fit himself more effectively for a part in denominational work."²⁸ Their family now numbered five, with Faith Gretta Barbara having been born July 1, 1892.²⁹ She married Roy William Barham in 1925 and died in 1975.³⁰

Ministry

Johanson spent 1893 learning all he could from teachers such as Pastor George B. Starr.³¹ At the end of the year, Johanson accepted the challenge of being among the first to take the SDA message to Western Australia as a literature evangelist, with F. W. Reekie and J. Hindson.³² Before the Johansons left Victoria, they enjoyed the privilege of attending the first SDA camp meeting held in Australia,³³ at Brighton, Victoria, January 5–22, 1894.³⁴

During their years in Western Australia, 1894–1897, both J. M. and Faith worked hard distributing literature and were very successful, recording high sales and many visits.³⁵ To enable Faith to go door-to-door, Alice Marie Campbell (who two years later became Mrs. Benjamin Bradley³⁶) was hired to look after their home and children. She became the first SDA convert in Western Australia, and three of her children became workers for the church.³⁷

When many promising contacts had been made, Pastor J. O. Corliss was sent, in 1896, to run an evangelistic campaign in Perth,³⁸ and the following year the Johansons returned east. In 1898 Johanson became the field agent for the New South Wales canvassing work (literature evangelism), training and supporting canvassers in that conference.³⁹ During this time, he had the opportunity to cooperate with Mrs. E. G. White and benefit from her personal counsel.⁴⁰

In 1899, Johanson was transferred to head up the canvassing work in the Central Conference,⁴¹ made up of Victoria, Tasmania, and South Australia.⁴² So, after just a year living in Sydney, the family moved back to Melbourne, living near North Fitzroy so that Mabel, Walter, and Gretta could attend the church school there.⁴³ On May 31, 1899, their second son, Eric John, was born,⁴⁴ followed by their third son, Bertram Olaff, on February 6, 1902, in North Fitzroy.⁴⁵

When the Central Australia Conference was broken into three conferences (1900–1901),⁴⁶ Johanson continued as the canvassing agent for the Victorian Tract Society.⁴⁷ These responsibilities involved much traveling from state to state, and this was extended when he was appointed as the publishing director for the Union Conference,⁴⁸ necessitating trips to every state of Australia and to New Zealand to oversee the distribution of books and the training of colporteurs.⁴⁹ From 1906 he had the added responsibility of Field Missionary Secretary, being the first to hold that position in Australia.⁵⁰ So in January 1906, he moved his family to Warburton near where the Signs Publishing Company was being established and where there was a growing SDA community.⁵¹ He was on various boards⁵² and attended most camp meetings,⁵³ which meant that he was away from home much of the time.

During the formulation of the constitution in the time leading up to the federation of the states into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, issues of separation of church and state arose. There was a push from a powerful religious organization for the establishment of a state religion; however, the SDA Church was able to defeat this. The result was the insertion of Section 116 in the constitution, giving freedom to exercise religion.⁵⁴ Several years later, the issue arose again in another form, and in 1907, Johanson was a member of a delegation to the Premier of Victoria to present the church's position, particularly on compulsory religious education in

state schools, and to advocate against religious laws being enacted.⁵⁵

An example of his relentless schedule can be seen in his 1908 itinerary. As well as making sure that SDA literature was readily available in all areas of the Australasian Union Conference, he organized training in missionary work to be carried out by local churches. Although based in Warburton, he didn't spend much time there. He commenced the year by sailing for the New Zealand camp meeting on January 4⁶⁶ and returning later in the month. During February–April, he traveled to Singapore, a lengthy sea voyage, to make arrangements at the newly established school in Singapore for the printing of literature on the SDA press and its distribution.⁵⁷ In June he commenced travel to attend the missionary convention in New Zealand during July 3–12,⁵⁸ returning to Melbourne in time to present the training at the Victorian missionary convention from July 31 to August 9.⁵⁹ Then he headed for Avondale, where he led out in the Publishers' Convention held there from August 26 to September 1.⁶⁰ This was followed by the Australasian Union Conference Session from September 3 to 13⁶¹ and the Queensland camp meeting from October 1 to 11.⁶² He immediately had to return to Sydney for the New South Wales camp meeting, October 8–18,⁶³ then continue on to Melbourne, where he embarked for the Western Australian camp meeting at the end of October.⁶⁴ This ran from November 5 to 15,⁶⁵ but he had to leave on the 10th in order to be in Hobart for the Tasmanian camp meeting from November 26 to December 6.⁶⁶ He attended an emergency meeting of the Union Conference Committee in Sydney on December 15 and 16,⁶⁷ with his last appointment for the year being the New Zealand camp meeting, for which he left on December 25.⁶⁸ He would then have a couple of weeks to catch his breath before leaving for the General Conference Session in the United States of America on January 26, 1909.⁶⁹

In 1909 he introduced the scholarship plan to enable prospective students of the college at Avondale to earn money toward their fees by selling denominational literature.⁷⁰ At the beginning of 1910, he became the manager of the Signs Publishing Company at Warburton.⁷¹ No change of address was needed, and he was able to spend a little more time with his family, although he still had many camp meetings and other meetings to attend as he retained the responsibilities of the union publishing director.⁷² The church administrators were becoming increasingly aware of Johanson's ability to discern multiple aspects of a situation and suggest possible plans of action, and they valued his counsel and clear decision-making.⁷³

His responsibilities were increased again in 1912 when he was appointed to be a vice president of the Union Conference in addition to his other tasks.⁷⁴ During that same year, his eldest daughter married Harry Stacey, a ministerial graduate, and in 1914 they went to Japan as missionaries.⁷⁵

Ordination and Leaving the Publishing Work

At the close of the 1913 Australasian Union Conference Session on October 3, Johanson was ordained to the gospel ministry.⁷⁶ This was a month before his 53rd birthday.

In 1915 he accompanied Pastor J. Fulton to Shanghai, China, at the request of Pastor A. G. Daniells (President of the General Conference), to investigate how the church in Australasia could assist the progress of SDA Christianity in the Asiatic Division.⁷⁷ They were away from February until June.⁷⁸ (For the period 1915–1919, the Australasian Union Conference was part of the Asiatic Division, which also included the Far East, India, Ceylon, Burma, China, Japan, and Chosen/Korea.)⁷⁹

At the Union Conference committee meetings held in Wahroonga at the end of October 1915, Pastor Johanson was asked to manage the Australasian Missionary College (AMC) at Avondale.⁸⁰ He accepted and resigned as the Signs manager.⁸¹ This meant that after 20 years, he was no longer associated with Adventist literature production or sales.

Australasian Missionary College

When the family moved from Warburton to Avondale, only three children went with them. Mabel and Walter were both married, and Gretta remained in Warburton, where she was working at the Signs Publishing Company.⁸²

The Johansons arrived at the end of January,⁸³ and the college year began on February 2⁸⁴ with an enrolment of 220, the highest it had ever been.⁸⁵ In August a major change in the college program was announced. The student body would be divided into two groups, each of which would study and work alternate days, so that each day half would be in class while the other half worked. So that the required number of days in class could be obtained, the year-end break (which had run from October to February) would be shortened to five weeks, ending the last week of January, thus enabling an extra term from October to December.⁸⁶ It was hoped that this would improve both finances and attendance.

When the new college “year” began on October 25, the enrolment had dropped to 170.⁸⁷ The following week, Professor Griggs, from the General Conference Education Department, visited for consultation and concurred with the administration that the academic standard at the college needed raising.⁸⁸ The decision was made to “raise the standard of education so as to make our advanced work equal in attainment to the usual high school course, this to be followed with full college work equal in attainment to the standard required by the university.”⁸⁹ Teachers and other graduates would then be able to obtain state recognition, which would greatly benefit SDA church schools in particular.⁹⁰

The East Asian Union Conference

In March 1917, Pastor Johanson was a delegate to the Asiatic Division meetings in Shanghai, where there was a reorganization of the conferences of the SDA church in the hemisphere extending from India in the west to the Pacific Ocean territories.⁹¹ In a surprise action, Pastor Johanson was elected as the president of the newly

formed East Asian Union Conference, comprising Manchuria, Korea, and Japan.⁹² He arrived home from China early in July⁹³ and made his farewell speech to the college at the 1917 closing exercises on August 17.⁹⁴ The family (including Gretta)⁹⁵ sailed for Japan in the first week of September⁹⁶ and arrived at their destination on October 1, 1917.⁹⁷ To their joy, they were based on the same compound in Tokyo as their daughter Mabel Stacey and her family.⁹⁸ In December, the Johansons' son Eric, aged 18, left for Hankow, China, where he was employed as a stenographer-bookkeeper for the North China Union Mission.⁹⁹ Bertram attended a Japanese language school, and Thelma did correspondence lessons.¹⁰⁰ Johanson was traveling much of the time, but the rest of the family assiduously went door-to-door selling books and gave away tracts wherever the opportunity arose.¹⁰¹

Back to Australia

Their time in Japan was short-lived. A further reorganization of the Asiatic Division in 1919 resulted in the dissolution of the East Asia Union and the abolition of Pastor Johanson's position. He and Faith, Gretta, Bertram, and Thelma returned to Australia on October 13, 1919, while Eric, who was now the Secretary-Treasurer of the Honan Mission, remained.¹⁰²

The manager of the Signs Publishing Company wanted to retire, so, opportunely, Johanson was able to step back into this familiar role in Warburton, where his family also felt so much at home.¹⁰³ Gretta and Bertram both joined the staff of the Signs in the new year, while Thelma continued her schooling. Pastor Johanson was soon once again involved in attending Union meetings,¹⁰⁴ running publishing conventions,¹⁰⁵ and encouraging those selling the church's literature.¹⁰⁶

In 1926, he was asked to move from managing the Signs Publishing Company to being the manager of the Australasian Conference Association, Ltd.¹⁰⁷ This took effect at the time of the Union Session in September, and his son Walter stepped into his shoes at the Signs.¹⁰⁸ October found him returning with Faith to live in Wahroonga again, accompanied by Thelma,¹⁰⁹ who joined the office staff at the church division headquarters.¹¹⁰

Death

Johanson was now 66 years old, and a photograph taken at the Health Food Managers' Convention held in September 1927 shows him using a walking cane.¹¹¹ During October and November of 1927, the *Australasian Record* carried a three-part history of the health food work in Australia, which he had painstakingly documented.¹¹² From October 19 to 31 he was a Union Conference representative at the New South Wales Conference camp meeting in Sydney.¹¹³ This was the last public function he is recorded as attending.

In January 1928, he was reported to be very ill in the Sydney Sanitarium,¹¹⁴ and it was stated that he had been suffering for more than a year.¹¹⁵ Mabel and Walter each came to visit him from over a thousand kilometers (more than 620 miles) away—Mabel from Toowoomba in the north, and Walter from Warburton in the south.¹¹⁶

Church members were asked to pray for him,¹¹⁷ but before the request could reach the churches, Pastor Johanson died. He died on February 29, 1928, a highly esteemed leader who was known and appreciated by thousands.¹¹⁸

From the time Pastor Johanson joined the SDA church, he had put personal interests aside in order to do his best. He traveled tens of thousands of kilometers in the course of his work. Throughout his life, Faith worked with him, placing many thousands of copies of SDA publications into the homes of people. After his death, Faith lived for 21 years in Wahroonga, New South Wales, until she died on October 19, 1949.¹¹⁹

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