



British Union Conference Executive Committee 1976, E.H. Foster is in the front row, fourth from left.
Photo courtesy of Stanborough Press.

Foster, Edwin H. (1916–1995)

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Edwin H. Foster was an evangelist, Bible teacher, conference president, and the longest-serving president of the British Union Conference (BUC).

Early Life and Career

Edwin Foster was born in Plymouth, England, in 1916.¹ He attended the Beumont and Fleetwood Adventist schools and became a qualified tradesman. In 1936, he made the decision to leave his profession to study for the ministry at Newbold College.² He graduated from Newbold College in 1941.³ Following his graduation, he was one of three graduates called to North England. On July 1, 1941, Foster assisted with public evangelism in Manchester, working alongside Pastors Robert Madgwich and Fred Edwards.⁴ The assignment did not last long as he returned to Newbold

College in 1942 as a Bible teacher.⁵ One former student recalled in *The British Advent Messenger* that when they asked him how they would know if they had been called to the ministry, Foster would reply: "Where do you see the greatest need in life? Where you see the greatest need, that is where you are called."⁶

On September 29, 1950, *The British Advent Messenger* reported that the British Union Conference had appointed Foster as the new secretary for Missionary Volunteer Services, Temperance, and Education.⁷ By November 1950, Foster had joined the Union office and taken up his new duties.⁸ At the British Union Minority Committee held in Watford on February 1, 1951, it was voted to appoint Foster as Bible teacher at Newbold College due to Pastor E. W. Marter accepting a call to serve as a missionary in the South African mission field. He began his new responsibilities on September 1, 1951.⁹

Having returned to Newbold College, Foster began a friendship with a young lady named Florence Burnett and, in 1954, they married.¹⁰

At the British Union Conference Quadrennial Session held in Watford in the Autumn of 1958, Foster was elected president of the North England Conference.¹¹ He held this position until he was elected president of the South England Conference at the South England Conference Session in Eastbourne, April 15-18, 1965.¹²

The British Union Conference

At the British Union Executive Committee held at Bright's hotel in Bristol on July 16, 1970, Foster was elected president of the British Union Conference to replace B. E. Seaton, who had been called to serve as an associate secretary of the General Conference.¹³

Reflecting on Foster's time in the South England Conference and looking forward to his service as president of the British Union Conference, *The British Advent Messenger* reported in August 1970:

Pastor Foster's work in South England has been marked by practical and spiritual wisdom. Here is a man of clear thought and disciplined action, 'God's man.' Though there are, no doubt, difficult days ahead for the Church in an age of spiraling costs, inflation and apathy, here is a man who will lead the British Union positively, aggressively, and spiritually into the Seventies.¹⁴

The following year at the British Union Quadrennial Conference in Hemel Hempstead, June 27-29, 1971, Foster was re-elected as president.¹⁵

An active and evident prayer life, an emphasis on soul winning, and the passing on to people that they too could work for God were important for Foster. He urged his fellow Adventist members to take these things seriously and to practice them. In the *British Advent Messenger* published on November 3, 1972, Foster challenged the members to pray with a growing maturity that challenged the faculties of the mind and will. He believed that the evidence of the Church's prayer life should be apparent in homes, offices, 'schools, workshops, churches, and committees.¹⁶

Earlier in July at the Welsh Mission Session, Foster had commented: "There has been enough Christian talk to reform a dozen worlds, but what is needed is that mighty words be matched by mighty actions. There is a place assigned for everyone where we are to work for Him."¹⁷

He did, however, believe that things were not as they were supposed to be among his fellow Adventists. People were lukewarm and full of words instead of action. This, he emphasized, had to change:

Is the leukemia of orthodoxy and institutionalism sapping our spiritual vitality and destroying the full-blooded witness that our fathers bore? Can a dedicated Seventh-day Adventist be complacent on the threshold of another new year about the extension of probation time for the exploding populations or a judgement-bound world? Or is this vocabulary so much 'old hat'? (I ask the question seriously, not cynically.) The true answer must be given in conduct and deeds not in theories and words. This is the challenge of 1972. May we will, through the power of the Spirit, be transformed from our lukewarm, Laodicean mentality into virile witnesses to our personal faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, our hearts and our homes will be signally blessed, and the true Adventist way of life will spread throughout our communities and country.¹⁸

On February 6, 1973, it was recorded in the British Union Minutes that Foster had for some time performed his duties under considerable strain. Dr. Henriksen, the Trans European Division medical secretary, recommended to the British Union Board that Foster should travel to Skodsborg Sanatorium, Denmark, for a check-up. It was voted to approve this recommendation.¹⁹

His emphasis on soul winning and preparing for God's kingdom was his theme in an article in *The British Advent Messenger* on January 9, 1976: "The focal point of time is the ushering in of eternity. To prepare for that climax is the greatest priority both for ourselves and for others. With our Master and Lord today, we may proclaim a year of the Lord's favor but without doubt we are swiftly approaching the day of judgement. This time of probation will end; the day of the Lord will come. 'Now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation.' As we enter 1976, what manner of people ought we to be?"²⁰ Clearly he still felt the need to repeat his message, that Adventists were not where they were supposed to be yet and that this had to change if serious soul winning and good preparation for God's kingdom was to be achieved.

Foster mentioned the lack of progress towards achieving true Christian character within the church and its members in an article published in *The British Advent Messenger* on June 26, 1981: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.' These words," he pointed out, "were said not to the disciples but to the multitude and to the Church at large they still apply. Maybe the lack of progress in my personal experience and yours, as well as in our Church, is centered in this problem, that we are not willing to pay the price. Self-esteem, self-aggrandizement, self-supremacy are ingrained in our personality. They are the root sins of our fallen nature. We have all been contaminated by this satanic poison. Self-sacrifice, self-denial, self-distrust: These are the characteristics of the true disciple."²¹

The greatest challenge of Foster's presidency of the British Union Conference was a multiracial membership that had developed very quickly within the church. This led to challenges which the church in Great Britain had not faced previously. Foster seemed to have confronted these challenges in a positive manner while also attending to his other duties.²²

From 1948 to 1962, waves of immigrants from former British Colonies came into Great Britain looking for a better life and opportunities. Some of these immigrants were people of color mainly from the Caribbeans²³ With the increase of people of color in the church, tensions started to rise as the newcomers brought with them cultural differences that had an impact on the worship style. They also wanted pastors who understood their way of worship, Adventist schools for their children, as well as a say in the way the church in Great Britain was being administrated²⁴

As tensions grew in Great Britain, the General Conference decided to intervene. On March 3, 1978, General Conference President R. H. Pierson, vice-presidents W. D. Eva and R. H. Thompson and Under-Treasurer M. Kemmer, met with the officers of NEWAD, the British Union Conference and presidents of the Conferences and Welsh Mission to discuss the request from some London churches and its members to be organized into a separate Regional Conference.²⁵ Members and ministers from churches in London had the opportunity to voice their opinions at a meeting in London on March 8, 1978. Present at this meeting was also representatives from the British Union Conference, which included Foster and South England Conference Executive Committee members. Observers without privileges included members of the British Union Conference Executive Committee and some church members. The conclusion of the meeting was that that "the acceptance by this consultative group of certain recommendations which would maintain the present organizational mixed racial unity of the Church, but increase black representation on committees, staffs and boards, within a stated time schedule. So that the whole constituency may be aware of these proposals they are herewith published."²⁶ In regards to the request of being organized into a separate Regional Conference, the following decision was made: "We have reached the consensus that organizing a regional conference is not the road we should follow here in Britain. We have arrived at this conclusion for theoretical, practical and spiritual reasons."²⁷ In order to reach fairness and justice for all, the following recommendations were given by the British Union Conference regarding their diverse membership:

The early employment of black office secretaries in the Union and South England Conference, (SEC) offices, as is already the case in the North British Conference. The election at each of the coming South England Conference and North British Conference sessions in May of one black officer (with departmental responsibilities). The election not later than the next British Union Conference (BUC) session of a black officer and at least one black departmental director for the BUC. The election at each of the coming SEC and NBC sessions of one black departmental director. The early placement with the General Conference and Inter-American Divisions of regular calls for experienced, top-drawer black pastors with leadership potential. The appointment at the next conference sessions of approximately six blacks to each of the conference committees in order to achieve a more balanced representation. The appointment at the earliest opportunity of black lay members to institutional boards (Stanborough School, Granose, The Stanborough Press). The immediate setting-up of a constitutional revision study committee to recommend helpful constitutional changes facilitating more black membership on union and conference committees and institutional boards.²⁸

These recommendations which became a reality from 1979, became known as the Pierson Package due to the involvement of the General Conference President at the time, R. H. Pierson.²⁹

At the Quinquennial Session of the British Union Conference held June 8-12, 1981, Pastor Harold Calkins was elected as president of the British Union Conference.³⁰ In his farewell speech, Foster said: "He was deeply thankful for the loyalty, support, constructive criticism and encouragement he had received during his eleven-year presidency."³¹ On July 12, 1981, the British Union Conference Executive Committee voted to request Foster to serve as an acting president of the British Union Conference until the new president could fully assume his responsibilities.³² Foster's request to retire was granted on September 3, 1981, effective from October 15, 1981.³³ Foster had served the church for 40 years and four months when he retired at the age of 65.³⁴ During this time, he had been the longest-serving president of the British Union Conference, having worked in the Conference for 11 years.³⁵

Final Years

Foster died in the morning of March 23, 1995, after having been ill for several months.³⁶ His wife had constantly been by his side in the final weeks of his life, and their two children Grenville and Cheryl travelled from East Anglia regularly to support their parents. The funeral was held on Thursday, March 30, in the Bournemouth Church.³⁷

Legacy

Foster provides a legacy of 40 years and four months of serving in the Church. He was a great spokesperson for evangelism and bible teaching, known for not holding back about his opinion that greater work in these areas could be done. He was a powerful speaker, and the fact that he maintained his presidency for so long is part of a powerful legacy.

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