

# Ward, Eric Calvin

## (1924–2004)

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### SAMUEL LONDON

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For nearly sixty years, Eric Calvin Ward served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a renowned pastor, evangelist, educator, church builder, and administrator.<sup>1</sup>

Eric was born on November 11, 1924, to Golbourne Albert Ward (1881–1976) and Estelle Wilhelmina Callender (1886–1942) in Los Angeles, California. He obtained his elementary and secondary education from Adventist schools in the Greater Los Angeles area.<sup>2</sup> Eric was baptized by Peter Gustavus Rodgers (1885–1961), pastor of the Wadsworth Seventh-day Adventist Church (currently known as the University SDA Church) in Los Angeles, California. It was Rodgers who inspired Ward to pursue a career in pastoral ministry.<sup>3</sup>

From 1942 to 1946 he attended Pacific Union College (PUC) in Angwin, California, where he graduated second in his class, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in theology.<sup>4</sup> At PUC Ward was a roommate of Warren St. Clair Banfield (1922–2006), a fellow theology student and future colleague in the gospel ministry. On campus he exercised his business acumen as a skilled barber, generating a large and loyal clientele.<sup>5</sup> In later years he completed a Master of Arts degree in pastoral ministry from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.<sup>6</sup> Ward married Gwendolyn Burton on June 6, 1948, in California. They had seven children: Carolyn Eloise, Prince Calvin, Golbourne Michael, Nathaniel Gabriel (1954–1954), Beverly Edna Estelle, Lynda Dianne, and Della Yvonne.<sup>7</sup>

In 1946 Ward began pastoring the Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church in Los Angeles, California.<sup>8</sup> After a few months he accepted an invitation to join the newly organized South Atlantic Conference of Seventh-day



Eric C. Ward

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Adventists as an evangelism intern under Edward Earl Cleveland (1921–2009).<sup>9</sup> Working in North Carolina, Ward was reunited with his college roommate, Warren Banfield, who was also serving as an intern under the tutelage of E. E. Cleveland.<sup>10</sup> Ward traveled throughout the South Atlantic Conference building up small churches and planting new ones.<sup>11</sup> From 1954 to 1962 he served in the official capacity of evangelist with the Southern Union of Seventh-day Adventists working in the states of North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Texas, and Tennessee.<sup>12</sup> A poignant story exemplifying Ward's courage and zeal is that of an evangelistic effort in Wilmington, North Carolina. In the midst of his conducting the series, his infant son (Nathaniel Gabriel) died. Nevertheless, the meetings continued. On the same day that Eric and Gwendolyn buried their son, Ward went to work that evening and preached a powerful sermon on the resurrection hope in Jesus. At the conclusion of the meetings, he baptized 306 persons. Consequently, Ward received a commission to oversee the construction of a new church in Wilmington.<sup>13</sup>

In 1962 Ward joined the Southern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists as its new executive secretary,<sup>14</sup> becoming the first African American to hold an administrative office in this conference.<sup>15</sup> From 1962 to 1973 he pastored churches in San Diego and Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> During his time as pastor of the 31st Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church in San Diego, he oversaw a dramatic expansion of the church facilities. Ward also developed and wrote the *Go Tell* lay evangelism and Bible study set utilized by Adventist pastors and soul winners around the world.<sup>17</sup>

A noted builder of churches, Ward caught the eye of Charles Edward Dudley (1927–2010), president of the South Central Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, who in 1973 invited him to serve as the senior pastor of the Oakwood College church in Huntsville, Alabama.<sup>18</sup> For more than eighty years congregants of the Oakwood church did not have a physical structure to call their own. Ward accepted the invitation and came to Oakwood with the architectural plans in his hand. Under his leadership, construction commenced, and was completed in June of 1977. At the time it was the largest black Adventist church edifice in the United States, with a maximum seating capacity between 2,500 and three thousand.<sup>19</sup> During Ward's 21-year tenure as pastor, the church's membership grew from 348 to more than two thousand.<sup>20</sup> While pastoring the church, Ward established and built the Mount Calvary Seventh-day Adventist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, and simultaneously led both congregations.<sup>21</sup> His ongoing passion for evangelism caused him to create the widely distributed *Revival Bible Lessons* in the late 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as a product and avid supporter of Adventist education, he led the first phase of constructing a building to house Oakwood Elementary, which was completed in 1993.<sup>23</sup> In addition to his pastoral work, Ward served as an adjunct professor of evangelism and Bible work at Oakwood College.<sup>24</sup> He became an ideal role model for students aspiring to enter the gospel ministry.<sup>25</sup> Ward also served as an assistant editor for *Message* magazine and was a respected member of the General Conference Committee. Moreover, he was a delegate to every General Conference session during his active period of ministerial service.

In 1994 Ward retired from his numerous duties at Oakwood.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, his passion for evangelism continued. In fact, he went on a world evangelism tour, preaching in Egypt, Israel, Greece, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia.<sup>28</sup> In May 1998 the South Atlantic Conference persuaded him to become the senior pastor of the Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He worked there for 13 months, during which time he led the congregation in purchasing a new church property and drawing up plans to construct a new facility for Berean Christian Junior Academy.<sup>29</sup>

In October 2002 Ward suffered a debilitating stroke that left him partially paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair.<sup>30</sup> He died on April 29, 2004, at the age of 79 in Madison County, Alabama.

Ward's legacy is that of true Christian love. In his pastoral ministry and evangelistic efforts he taught thousands of persons to love as Jesus did and to truly love all humanity. As a result his ministry had a reach that drew persons from all facets of society. It is estimated that Ward baptizing more than five thousand persons into the Christian faith.<sup>31</sup> The churches he established and the buildings that were constructed through his leadership will continue to be memorials of Ward's dedicated Christian service motivated by love.

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## SOURCES

"Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary." Oakwood College church, May 4, 2004. Oakwood University Archives.

"Eric C. Ward: Evangelist." File on E. C. Ward. Oakwood University Archives.

Norman III, R. Steven. "Pastor Eric C. Ward Remembered." *Southern Tidings*, November 2004.

Wilcher, Willie. "Eric Calvin Ward: Builder of the Oakwood College Church." Research paper, Oakwood College, 1994.

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## NOTES

1. R. Steven Norman III, "Pastor Eric C. Ward Remembered," *Southern Tidings*, November 2004, 32.
2. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary," Oakwood College church, May 4, 2004, Oakwood University Archives.
3. Ibid. See also "Eric C. Ward: Evangelist," file on E. C. Ward, Oakwood University Archives; Norman III, 32.
4. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary." See also Norman III, 32.
5. Ibid.
6. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary.".

7. Ibid.
8. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary." See also Norman III, 32.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Norman III, 32.
12. "Eric C. Ward: Evangelist." See also "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary."
13. Norman III, 32. See also "Eric C. Ward: Evangelist."
14. Ibid. See also "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary." The document "Eric C. Ward: Evangelist," in the Oakwood University Archives, states that he held the position of associate secretary in the Southern California Conference.
15. Norman III, 32. See also "Eric C. Ward: Evangelist."
16. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary".
17. Ibid. See also Norman III, 32.
18. Norman III, 33. See also "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary."
19. Ibid. See also Willie Wilcher, "Eric Calvin Ward: Builder of the Oakwood College Church" (research paper, Oakwood College, 1994), 2, 3.
20. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary".
21. Ibid. See also Norman III, 33.
22. Norman III, 32.
23. Ibid. 33. See also "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary".
24. Norman III, 33.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid. See also "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary".

27. Norman III, 33.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid. See also "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary."

31. "Elder Eric Calvin Ward obituary."

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