

Baptiste, Harold Wilson (1938–2019)

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Harold Baptiste

Photo courtesy of Shirley Baptiste.

Harold Wilson Baptiste was a Grenadian evangelist, pastor, and administrator who served in both the Caribbean and the United States for more than 30 years. He served as Executive Secretary of the Northeastern Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1978 to 1990); Executive Secretary of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (1990 to 2002); and as a General Vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (2002 to 2005). "Baptiste's special burden for urban outreach and training the next generation of leaders guided his ministry."¹

Early Life, Education, and Entry into Ministry

Harold Baptiste was born April 2, 1938 in Victoria, Grenada, West Indies, to Grenadian parents Anthony Antoine Baptiste and Sophie Anastasia Lucas Baptiste. He was the oldest of their three sons with brothers Oliver and Orville following him. His parents became Adventists when the boys were teenagers, and were active lay leaders

in their local churches.

The family migrated to Trinidad when Harold was five years old, and he received his elementary education there. During his early high school years, his parents returned to Grenada. At the age of 14, Harold was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church and resolved that he would become a preacher of the gospel. Although Harold was an excellent student, he was unable to attend his final years of high school because of financial constraints. However, he studied on his own and passed the external Senior Cambridge Examinations allowing him to enroll in Caribbean Union College (now University of the Southern Caribbean) in Maracas Valley, Trinidad in the fall of 1956. There he successfully completed his Associate in Theology degree, graduating in the class of 1958.²

Harold Baptiste received his ministerial license in 1961, and served his internship in the British Guiana Mission (now Guyana Conference) for four years,³ before continuing his formal education at West Indies College (now Northern Caribbean University) in Mandeville, Jamaica. He graduated in 1962 with the Bachelor of Theology degree, and immediately enrolled at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. There he earned the Master of Biblical Languages degree, graduating in 1965.⁴ Over the years, continued study earned him a second master's degree in Sacred Theology in Parish Ministry, this from the New York Theological Seminary, graduating May 18, 1975. Evidence of Baptiste's commitment to lifelong learning for service is seen in his many earned certificates, including in Family Life (1977), Christian Leadership (1983), and Risk Management (1986, 1987 and 1989).⁵ In addition, he served from September 1965 to September 1967 at The Medical Library Center of New York, where he more fully developed his knowledge base and interest in urban ministry, particularly focused on the many challenges experienced by Seventh-day Adventism in large American metropolitan areas.⁶

Marriage and Family

While living in New York, Baptiste renewed a growing relationship with Shirley Allison Christiani, a native of Guyana, and living in New York at the time. The two were united in marriage, September 12, 1965. At this point in her long career in civil and foreign service, Shirley worked at the United Nations in New York City. She is the fourth of the eight daughters of George Alan Christiani and Regina De Nobrega, both nationals of Guyana.

Harold's and Shirley's is a familiar Adventist love story, in which Shirley was drawn to the Adventist message through an apparently serendipitous route. At a time when her uncle attempted to introduce her to Adventism, she was Catholic and not interested in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Later, when she did wish to learn more about Adventism, prayerful interventions allowed her Saturdays off from work to attend church, and she joined a Bible study group. The Bible class teacher was the young associate pastor, Harold Baptiste, and they became friends. After circumstances separated them for a few years, they reconnected and committed their lives to each other and to ministry. Three children were born to their union: Harold Wilson Baptiste ("Wilson"),

Keith Anthony Baptiste and Michelle Laverne Baptiste.⁷

Ministry in the United States

In 1967, Baptiste accepted a call from the Northeastern Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in the Atlantic Union of the North American Division, and entered the gospel ministry in the United States. Pastoring the First Seventh-day Adventist Church of White Plains in New York was followed by service in two other congregations, the Brooklyn Temple Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Mount Vernon Seventh-day Adventist Church. Evangelistic leadership and the promotion of growth in these congregations during his pastoral tenure in this large urban area was the realization of a long-held dream.

Administrative Service

In 1979 Baptiste was elected Executive Secretary of the Northeastern Conference. He served in this position for 11 years, 1979-1990.⁸ At the July 1990 General Conference Session held in Indianapolis, Indiana, Elder Baptiste was elected Executive Secretary of the North American Division and served for 12 years.⁹ In 2002, he was appointed a General Vice President of the General Conference and served until the time of his retirement in July 2005.¹⁰ Elder Baptiste had the responsibility of promoting worldwide evangelism along with developing and implementing the Church's leadership and training programs. He retired having served the Adventist Church for 16 years as an intern and district pastor, and for more than 25 years in administrative positions.

Legacy

In recognition of the critical role that his early ministerial training played in his subsequent work as a pastor in the Caribbean and in the United States, Baptiste's family established the Annual Harold Baptiste Lectureship series in 2013 at the University of the Southern Caribbean School of Religion and Theology. This event brings insightful Adventist leaders to speak on campus while providing fund-raising to support two academic scholarships to deserving students.¹¹

After years of declining health, Elder Harold Wilson Baptiste quietly passed to his rest with his wife and other family members present, May 25, 2019, in Baltimore, Maryland. His funeral service was held June 2, 2019, at the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland, where many church leaders recounted his numerous contributions to the Church he loved dearly.¹²

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NOTES

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6. Adventist Archives. *Minutes of the General Conference Committee*, Annual Council. Secretary's Report, October 2, 1990, P.15/116, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1990-10a.pdf>.
7. Glenn O. Phillips, *Singing in a Strange Land: The Hanson Place SDA Church, 1958-2008* (Littleton, MA: Tapestry Press, 2008), 172-173; Ella S. Simmons, Personal Interviews with Shirley A. Baptiste in Laurel and Baltimore, Maryland, (January 2019 - May 2021).
8. "Workers in transition," *North American Regional Voice*, October 1979, 23.
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11. Ibid.

12. Georgia Standish, "Harold W. Baptiste, Former NAD Secretary, Passes Away," *Adventist Journey*, vol. 2, no. 9, (September 10, 2019).

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