

James, Sunderaj (1917–1983) and Elizabeth Christine (Latour) (1921–2000)

CHERYL CHRISTO HOWSON, AND WESLEY JAMES

Cheryl Christo Howson earned a graduate diploma in computer aided interior designing at the Dr. Bhanuben Nanavati College of Architecture for Women in Pune, India. She co-founded an interior design company in Sri Lanka and worked as a copywriter. She contributed to the morning devotional published by Women's Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the *Shepherdess International Journal* magazine, and the *Adventist Review*. She has written several plays. Currently (2020), she lives in Hosur, India while preparing for a piano exam.

Wesley James

Sunderaj James served the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Southern Asia Division as a pioneer indigenous church administrator, along with his wife, Elizabeth.

Early Life and Conversion

Sunderaj James was born in Madras (now Chennai) on July 24, 1917, to Victor Solomon and Esther James. He was the first of three sons (Sunderaj, Selvaraj, and Sathyaraj) and two daughters (Margaret and Mercy).

When he was 16, he and his mother heard the Adventist message and joined the church in spite of opposition from other family members. Soon after, he enrolled as a student in the Prakasapuram Seventh-day Adventist school, where he was baptized by Pastor Carter.²

Education and Marriage

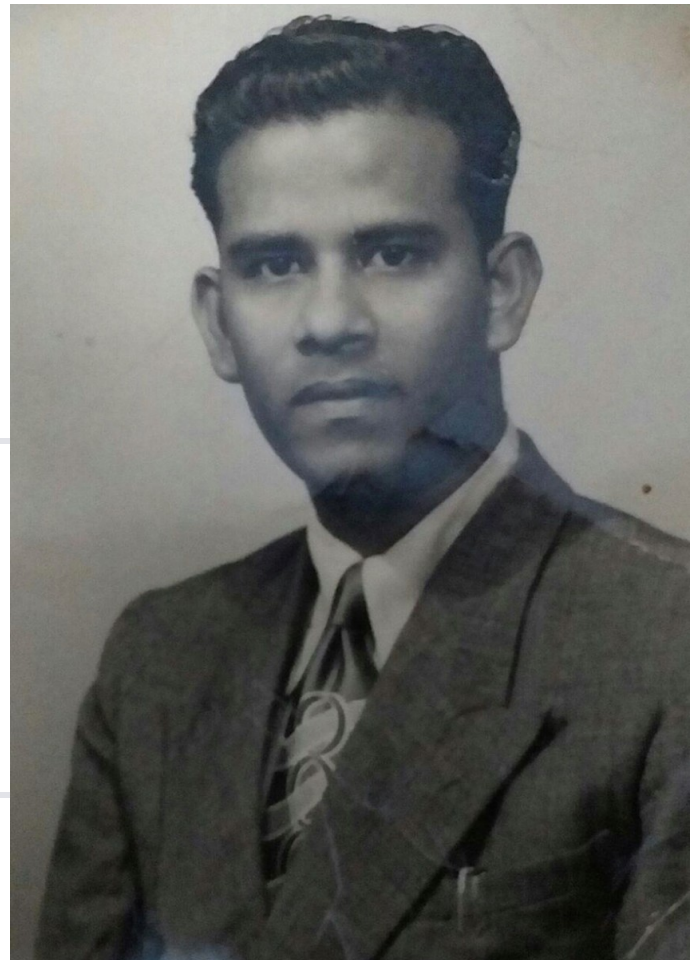
After completing high school, James joined the South India Training School in Krishnarajapuram, Bangalore, which was renamed Spicer College in 1937. He graduated in 1938 with a diploma in the commercial course,³ having once held the college record for speed in typing and shorthand.⁴

Sunderaj James married Elizabeth Christine Latour on August 8, 1945. The young couple set up their home at Salisbury Park, Pune. They had four children, but only two survived infancy, a daughter, Priscilla, and a son, Wesley⁵

Ministry

James joined denominational service on June 9, 1938 at Salisbury Park, Pune. He served in various capacities, beginning as office secretary at the OWPH (Oriental Watchman Publishing House), and later as secretary to various division presidents, including G. G. Lowry, E. M. Meleen, and N. C. Wilson.⁶ In 1953 he was appointed assistant statistical secretary for the Southern Asia Division.

In 1955, James and his family moved to the Northwest India Union, where he served for a few years as Secretary for the Home Missionary and Sabbath School departments, and in 1957 as Voice of Prophecy director.⁷ The James family moved back to Salisbury Park, Pune, in 1958 when he was appointed to the Division Temperance department,⁸ a work that he was involved in almost until his retirement in 1980.⁹



Sunderaj James
Photo courtesy of Gordon Christo.

As Temperance Secretary he travelled quite extensively, mostly by train, 3^d class, and by bus. In 1960, while travelling from Pune to Madras, a projector that belonged to the office was stolen, and he was promptly removed from his position for negligence. C. R. Boney, secretary for the Radio department, was given additional charge of the Temperance department in his place.¹⁰ James was appointed corresponding secretary for the Voice of Prophecy, but retained as a member of the Division committee.¹¹ He continued helping the Temperance department when called upon.¹² In June 1961 James was appointed Assistant to the Radio and Temperance departments,¹³ and during the Southern Asia Division committee on December 23, 1961, he was ordained to the gospel ministry in the Salisbury Park Memorial Church, Pune.¹⁴

Following the San Francisco General Conference Session in 1962, Sunderaj James was appointed secretary for the Division Temperance and Public Relations departments.¹⁵ He integrated the functions of both the departments to “present Jesus Christ, to win good will for His church, allay prejudices, to prevent wrong impressions, to lay a firm foundation for all evangelistic activities, and to place truth before the multitude.”¹⁶

In this capacity, he also served as the secretary of the Indian Temperance Association, a partnership between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and government and public officials. This partnership resulted in many public rallies, Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking programs all across India, Smoking Sunder demonstrations, and work with prohibition forces.¹⁷ In addition, the ITA worked in cooperation with the International Commission for the Prevention of Alcoholism in developing and conducting seminars and institutes of scientific studies.¹⁸

James arranged for M. Carol Hetzell, Associate Public Relations Secretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, to meet Shrimati Indira Gandhi, India’s Prime Minister, in Delhi, on May 11, 1967. They offered the Adventist Church’s assistance to help alleviate the Bihar famine conditions, and also presented the Prime Minister with a copy of *A Century of Miracles*.¹⁹

In 1969, James arranged for General Conference President R. H. Pierson, and Southern Asia Division President Dr. R. S. Lowry to meet the President of India, Shri V. V. Giri, who was presented copies of *The Desire of Ages*, and *A Century of Miracles*.²⁰

In January 1970 Sunderaj James served as the organizing secretary for the International Conference on Prohibition, in connection with the celebrations of the Gandhi Centenary in Delhi.²¹ Sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist Church,²² the conference was inaugurated by the president of the India Republic, Shri V. V. Giri, and attended by 500 delegates, which included government and public servants, and 25 Adventists.²³ Adventist health principles were presented to prominent leaders of the country.²⁴ Member of Parliament Dr. Sushila Nayar, who served as the working chairwoman for the conference, stated in her concluding remarks, “The Seventh-day Adventists have been a tower of strength to this conference. They are one hundred per cent behind the prohibition cause. These people go far beyond us in interpreting the prohibition concept. They don’t even drink tea. We have learned from them in this conference that the Bible condemns drink.”²⁵ The Adventist delegation also met Shrimati Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India.²⁶

Soon after the conference, James was invited to work for the government of India, which he politely declined, stating that he was ordained to the gospel ministry and would continue to serve the people of India through the Adventist church. He continued to enjoy the goodwill and support of public officials and accomplished much.²⁷

At the Atlantic City General Conference session in 1970, James took on the Stewardship and Development departments as well,²⁸ and preached that faithful stewardship is a touchstone of true Christian experience.²⁹ In 1972 he left the Public Relations department.³⁰

At the Vienna General Conference session in 1975, Sunderaj James was elected as the general field secretary of the Southern Asia Division.³¹ In 1976, he was appointed as the Religious Liberty Department Advisor (the term then used for secretary/director).³² In this capacity he led the Adventist Church response to the “Freedom of Religion Bill 1978” (an anti-conversion bill) by sending an appeal to the Prime Minister of India, Shri Morarji Desai, and all Indian members of parliament. A few key political leaders responded to the appeal,³³ and the bill eventually did not make it to a vote.³⁴

Later Life and Contribution

Upon his retirement in 1980, Sunderaj James served as pastor of the Salisbury Park Memorial Church on the Division Headquarters campus in Pune. After a brief illness, he died August 27, 1983, in Salisbury Park, where he had spent most of his life.³⁵

Sunderaj James served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for 45 years, and was well known throughout the Southern Asia Division for his connection with temperance work.³⁶ He had no lasting monetary assets on earth; no money, no house, no land. He would often say, “My God has provided for all my needs.” And yet to those who knew him, he is remembered as one who travelled extensively, one who preached extemporaneous and passionately, one who gave spontaneously and generously, one who prayed sincerely and unceasingly, and one who served with integrity and gratitude.³⁷ When asked the secret of his success, he said, “our standards are so high . . . to satisfy the requirements of the Adventist Church for 40 years can only be done by sheer grace of God.”³⁸

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NOTES

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