

Unruh, Tobias Edgar (1894–1982)

MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

T. Edgar Unruh, an educator and conference president, played a critical role in facilitating historic consultations between Seventh-day Adventist and American evangelical leaders during the 1950s.

Early Years

Tobias Edgar Unruh (preferred name Edgar) was born on July 15, 1894, in Parker, South Dakota, to Peter and Eva (Dirksen) Unruh.¹ His parents were Russian-German immigrants to America who married in South Dakota. Edgar was the next to the youngest among 13 children, one of whom died in infancy.²

Edgar began pharmaceutical work at the age of 14. He joined the Seventh-day Adventist church around age 20 and left his work to prepare himself for denominational employment. He graduated from Lacombe Academy in Alberta, Canada, and did some canvassing in the summers of 1916 and 1917.³

With no formal training as a teacher, Edgar was appointed to the church elementary school in Rockyford near Calgary in 1920. The following year he transferred to the Battleford Academy, Saskatchewan, to serve as preceptor and mathematics teacher.⁴ It was there that he met Margaret Schwartz who was teaching book-keeping. They married on September 6, 1922. Margaret's parents were Russian Germans who had migrated to Canada.⁵ Both Edgar and Margaret were fluent in the German language.



T. Edgar Unruh

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Educational and Conference Leadership

Unruh spent the academic years of 1924 through 1926 at Emmanuel Missionary College, Battle Creek, Michigan, graduating from the literary course with a major in history and a minor in language education. After graduation he was appointed principal at Hinsdale Sanitarium Academy, Illinois.⁶ In 1928 he became principal at Cedar Lake Academy, Michigan. Margaret served as librarian.⁷ Unfortunately, part way through the 1930 school year Edgar suffered a nervous collapse and was obliged to take time off and recuperate.⁸ He returned to teach Bible, mathematics and history at Battle Creek Academy from 1930 to 1932.⁹

In 1932, Unruh was appointed to heavier responsibilities as education secretary for the Michigan Conference, with 44 teachers and 826 students spread among the 33 elementary schools under his supervision.¹⁰ At the beginning of his term of office he was ordained to the ministry.¹¹ He carried the education portfolio for six years and was then appointed to the same role in the Lake Union Conference with headquarters at Berrien Springs, Michigan.¹² In 1939, Unruh took part in an American-wide school curriculum revision sponsored by the General Conference Education Department.¹³

Unruh was called from educational administration to the presidency of the Wisconsin Conference in 1940. The role included the religious liberty portfolio.¹⁴ He served in this capacity until 1947 when he accepted the presidency of the East Pennsylvania Conference, headquartered in Reading.¹⁵ One enduring legacy of his term of office was the establishment of Blue Mountain Academy at Hamburg, Pennsylvania, which began operation in 1955.¹⁶

Adventist-Evangelical Discussions

From his desk in 1949 Unruh wrote a cordial letter to radio speaker Dr. Donald Barnhouse commending him for his talks covering the Book of Romans and righteousness by faith. Barnhouse, pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, was editor of the widely-circulated *Eternity* magazine and an influential figure in American evangelicalism. Unruh's letter sparked an exchange of correspondence that later came into the hands of Walter Martin who had begun researching Seventh-day Adventism for the series of books he was writing about American "cults" – religious groups outside the Protestant mainstream regarded as non-Christian or sub-Christian.

In 1955 Barnhouse, Martin and representatives of the General Conference came together to discuss similarities and differences between evangelical Christian and Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Unruh was the moderator for these discussions and a second round that took place in 1956. These meetings were the catalyst for the General Conference authorized book titled *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (1957) and Martin's book *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventists* (1960).¹⁷

Contrary to their previous perceptions, Barnhouse and Martin concluded that, despite their very strong disagreement on some points, they could regard Adventists as their brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow evangelical Christians. It was thus a landmark exchange between American evangelicals and Seventh-day Adventists, one that is most often regarded as leading to better mutual understanding. However, it also led to dissent and protest among evangelicals and especially among Adventists, and the controversy has persisted and at times strengthened in the years since.¹⁸

Later Years

Following Unruh's lengthy presidency of the East Pennsylvania Conference, he was elected in 1960 to lead the Indiana Conference, a role he held until his retirement in 1963.¹⁹ It was only a partial retirement, however, because Unruh accepted responsibility for Trust Services in the Southeastern California Conference and continued serving in this way for another 10 years.²⁰

Throughout her husband's career, Margaret contributed 40 years of secretarial work in the various church offices where they were located.²¹

The Unruhs remained in California following full retirement in 1973, residing in Grand Terrace near Loma Linda. They had no children. Both enjoyed long lives. Edgar passed away peacefully on June 8, 1982, aged 87.²² Margaret passed away in Loma Linda Convalescent Hospital on December 23, 1993, aged 96. They were laid to rest in Montecito Memorial Park, Colton, San Bernardino County.²³

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