

Allegheny conference office at Pine Forge, Pennsylvania.



Allegheny Conference headquarters, Pine Forge, Pennsylvania, 1961.

From *North American Informant*, November-December 1961.

Allegheny Conference (1944–1967)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

Douglas Morgan is a graduate of Union College (B.A., theology, 1978) in Lincoln, Nebraska and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., history of Christianity, 1992). He has served on the faculties of Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland and Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. His publications include *Adventism and the American Republic* (University of Tennessee Press, 2001) and *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Review and Herald, 2010). He is the ESDA assistant editor for North America.

The Allegheny Conference was one of the seven conferences organized in response to the April 10, 1944 recommendation of the General Conference Committee that union conferences in the United States where the “colored constituency” was deemed “sufficiently large” organize “colored conferences...administered by colored

officers and committees." According to George E. Peters, head of the North American Colored Department, these conferences were established "to meet present-day conditions" of racial segregation and inequality and thus "help in the speedy finishing of God's work on earth."¹

In the Columbia Union Conference, 40 predominantly black congregations with members totaling 3,576 were transferred from the Chesapeake, East Pennsylvania, West Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Potomac and West Virginia conferences to form the new Allegheny Conference that began operation on January 1, 1945. Allegheny thus became a member conference of the Columbia Union with the same status as the aforementioned conferences. That outcome, however, was not reached easily but was instead sharply contested during the second half of 1944.

Contested Origins

To implement the historic General Conference action of April 1944, the Columbia Union formed a Commission Regarding Organization of the Colored Work that met on June 19, 1944. The commission recommended proceeding with organization of a new conference, but one that would only include the black churches in the eastern part of the union. Based on the assumption that the Columbia Union territory was too vast for a single black conference to administer, the commission asserted that the black churches in the West Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio conferences lacked sufficient membership to form a conference of their own and thus recommended that they remain within their respective majority white conferences.²

Letters and petitions from members of several of the eight black congregations in the Ohio Conference along with a letter signed by four of the five ordained black ministers in the western portion of the Columbia Union sent to General Conference president J.L. McElhany in October 1944 urged that their churches be organized into a second black conference within the union.³ Though the membership of such a conference, close to 1,300, would have been relatively small, it would have been larger than at least three other conferences in North America, including West Virginia (1,094 in 1944).

Then, as the November 29 date for a final meeting of the commission approached, an even more serious issue emerged. On November 16, G.E. Peters warned J.L. McElhany that the Columbia Union was now wavering over whether to proceed with the black conference plan at all. Concern about the financial viability of the proposed new conference had been expressed all along, and six of the eleven provisions of the commission's June 19 recommendation had involved establishing rigorous standards for its fiscal operations. But by November it appeared almost certain to Peters that the doubts of some of the union's leaders were not merely about finances but about the capacity of "the poor colored brethren" to administer conferences. "They preconceive disaster" if colored conference organization proceeds, he said.⁴

Although a substantial sector of the black lay constituency had not initially favored the separate conference plan, they had now fully embraced it, said Peters. Thus, the only way to "relieve the tension" caused by the

current “unrest among the laity,” was to proceed with black conference organization by the close of 1944.⁵ Another flurry of letters and telegrams from the black constituency in Ohio soon bore out Peters’ point, urging speedy implementation of the separate conference plan in a way that would cover the entire Columbia Union, whether with one conference or two.⁶

At their 9:00 a.m. meeting on November 29, the General Conference officers agreed that the president (McElhany), secretary (E.D. Dick), and treasurer (W.E. Nelson) would all go to the meeting of the Columbia Union commission being held that same day at union headquarters (then located in Takoma Park) to address the “serious problem” caused by the “tendency on the part of the union to draw away from the plan of colored conferences.”⁷ The participation of the General Conference officers along with that of a black representative from each conference in the union no doubt influenced the commission’s decision that the entire union territory would be included in the plan and that a single conference would be the best option after all. The black constituency was called upon to send representatives to Ebenezer church in Philadelphia to organize the new conference on December 17 and 18, 1944.⁸

Conference Organization

Thirty-seven congregation sent a total of 237 lay representatives to the Philadelphia meeting, joining three members the General Conference Committee (3), the Columbia Union Conference committee (13), and the black ordained and licensed ministers employed throughout the union (30) as voting delegates. Though some lay delegates and at least two leading ministers voiced strong opposition during the discussion, a motion “to organize a Colored Conference for the believers” passed by a vote of 265 to 18.⁹ “Susquehanna Conference” was initially voted as the name of the new conference but G.E. Peters warned that it would be too hard to spell. A new vote approved a change to “Allegheny Conference.”¹⁰

John H. Wagner was elected president, with the additional responsibility as secretary of the Religious Liberty Department. Wagner was a highly successful evangelist who had most recently pastored the large Berea Temple church in Baltimore (1939-1942) and the Ephesus church in Washington, D.C. (1942-1943), while at the same time serving as secretary of the Colored Department of the Columbia Union. J.L. Moran was called from the presidency of Oakwood College to become the first secretary-treasurer of the Allegheny Conference. H.D. Warner was elected secretary of the Publishing Department and W.R. Robinson of the Home Missionary and Sabbath School Departments.¹¹ Monroe A. Burgess, who had been pastor of Ethnan Temple church in Pittsburgh, took the responsibility of Education and Young People’s Missionary Volunteer secretary by May 1945.¹²

The Allegheny Conference was born amidst “a flood of apprehension and misgiving,” Wagner noted in his report at the end of his first two-year term.¹³ Would the experiment die in infancy? Or, might it survive, but only as a sickly dependent?

A financial crisis threatened to debilitate the new organization right at the outset, even though the operating plans approved at the December 1944 meeting included a provision for start-up funds. Each of the other conferences in the Columbia Union were to calculate the portion that the black churches in its territory had contributed to building up its reserves over the past five years and share that amount with Allegheny. But then a crucial exception was added. The amount was to be adjusted by “taking into consideration existing liabilities, obligations and commitments.” Thus, Jacob Justiss reported, after establishing a start-up amount that was modest in the first place, the Columbia Union (collectively) had then “taken back the major portion for bad debts, colporteur, Book and Bible House, etc.”¹⁴

Thus left in “drastic poverty,” Allegheny Conference would have to improvise to get its operations underway:

The first office was located in J.T. Dodson’s Book Store on Georgia Avenue across the street from the Miner Teacher’s College. Elder Wagner’s desk was the sink with a board across it so that during his travels Alta Williams and Florine Langford, the secretaries, could easily transfer his desk back to its original purpose.¹⁵

With the help of a secured loan from the Columbia Union and the support of the constituency, a house at 1208 Irving Street, Northeast, in Washington was acquired, renovated, equipped and ready for occupancy as the conference office headquarters in July 1945.¹⁶

Pine Forge Institute

As president, though, John H. Wagner had his sights set much higher than placing routine conference functions on a sound financial basis, though that was indeed of fundamental importance. Wagner believed the conference could be a means for addressing long unresolved disparities that had handicapped the advance of Adventism among the black American population.

Education was the first and foremost. For nearly forty years, black Adventists in the Washington, D.C. area and the broader mid-Atlantic region had repeatedly, and often forcefully protested the racially defined restrictions limiting their children’s access to training at an Adventist school. Repeated study commissions, recommendations, and even General Conference resolutions over the decades had failed to bring a solution.¹⁷

The General Conference Spring 1944 meeting had tried again. Among its several measures intended to meet the problems of the black work in a decisive way, the council in Chicago had recommended establishment of a school in the North “where advanced training can be given our colored youth.” The phrase “advanced training” was not defined but the intention for something beyond a basic high school curriculum was definite. The new school would offer postsecondary training as the Northern counterpart to Oakwood, while the latter “would serve the southern field primarily in the new set up.”¹⁸

The Spring 1944 recommendation had called for a commission to formulate an action plan to submit to the Autumn Council in October of the same year. But with the General Conference process already bogged down a

year later,¹⁹ Wagner was convinced that the Allegheny Conference should be the agency for bringing the long-delayed Northern school into reality. In a proposal sent to Columbia Union and General Conference leaders in October 1945, he pointed out that the circumstances faced by black Adventists in the Columbia Union territory differed from those of the Atlantic and Lake Unions.

“We have no school at all in the Columbia Union to which we can send our boys and girls,” he wrote, referring to schools at the boarding academy and college levels. Though subject to limitations previously discussed, academies and colleges in the Atlantic and Lake Unions at least did admit colored students. But in the Columbia Union, Washington Missionary College and all the twelve-grade boarding schools barred black students completely. That included Plainfield Academy in New Jersey, which had been targeted by the NAACP.

Our people have long labored under a conviction that this [establishing a Northern school] should be done and it has been very hard to ward off all of the queries of our people because of the present situation and seemingly no preparation for betterment. It is getting to the place where something must be done.²⁰

The main thing Wagner wanted the General Conference to do was simply approve what Allegheny Conference was committed to doing. Conference workers had already made personal pledges totaling over \$10,000, and now the conference leadership was ready to “go to the field” and raise the total to \$25,000 by the end of the year, he wrote to L.K. Dickson, the new General Conference vice president for North America on October 23, 1945.²¹

Soon thereafter an historic 575-acre estate at Pine Forge, five miles northwest of Pottstown, Pennsylvania, became available as a location for the school. The General Conference Committee gave its approval of the purchase on December 13, a loan from Dr. Grace Kimbrough of the Ebenezer church in Philadelphia provided the earnest money, and the deal was finalized the next day.²² However, in the coming months Wagner’s skill at diplomacy was needed to turn back an effort to block establishment of a “Negro school” on the property by local citizens fearing a decline in property values, among other concerns.²³

The conference met a goal of raising \$45,000 by July 1, 1946, making it possible to open Pine Forge Institute for the 1946-1947 school year with 97 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. The General Conference chipped in \$7,600, slightly more than 50% of the \$15,000 that had been appropriated for eventual development of “a colored school in the North.”²⁴ J.L. Moran accepted appointment as principal, and F.L. Bland was called to replace Moran as secretary-treasurer of the conference. Within a year-and-a-half, the new conference that started with a board over a sink for the president’s desk, had accomplished a major stride toward fulfillment of a dream deferred by decades of denominational inaction.

Instead of “academy” the school was named an “institute” because that term “does not tend to put a cap on the school grade level,” Moran explained. “In other words, the board of directors look forward to larger things for Pine Forge.”²⁵ National advances in civil rights during the 1950s and beyond influenced a shift toward racial

integration and diversity at existing institutions as the path toward equal opportunity in Adventist higher education, rather than upgrading Pine Forge beyond the secondary level. But that, of course, in no way diminishes the significance of the school's founding story or its seventy-five year history of providing a strong educational foundation for thousands of black Adventists over a seventy-five year history.

Conference Center

Pine Forge would also become the site for annual camp meetings, summer camp for children and youth, constituency meetings to elect officers, and gatherings for other varied purposes at conference headquarters. Construction of a new conference office building was completed there in the summer of 1947 with labor contributed by lay church members and conference workers, including President John H. Wagner.²⁶

The Allegheny Conference camp meeting in 1947 was not only its first, but also the first conducted by a black conference, and the only one that summer. Thus, the members of the other black conferences were invited, and attendance surpassed 3,000 on the weekends. Jacob Justiss, then a history teacher at Pine Forge Institute, described the experience: "The big yellow tent was full at all times in spite of the incessant downpour. Benches along the old wire fence were the greeting places for long separated friends. It was a great spiritual and social success."²⁷

Black Adventist leaders such as G.E. Peters, F.L. Peterson, Anna Knight, and Louis B. Reynolds, the recently-appointed editor of *Message* magazine, along with Columbia Union and General Conference leaders were perennials at the early Allegheny camp meetings. Also, the denomination's missionary and media celebrities soon began appearing such as story-teller par excellence Eric B. Hare in 1948, evangelist George Vandeman in 1949, and H.M.S. Richards, Sr., speaker of the Voice of Prophecy broadcast, who, accompanied by soloist Del Delker and the King's Heralds quartet, made the first of numerous appearances in 1950.²⁸

Camp meeting was also the time to buy Adventist books, music, Sabbath school materials, and health foods. After limited operations in a tent for the first two years, the Allegheny Book and Bible House was constructed and operating as a full-fledged store by the 1949 convocation.²⁹

A.V. Pinkney, a journalist who handled media relations for the conference in addition to serving as education and MV secretary, developed a positive relationship with the region's leading newspaper, the *Pottstown Mercury*, which gave the camp meetings extensive and laudatory coverage. By 1957, with much lesser representation from other conferences who now conducted their own events, attendance at Allegheny camp meeting reached 4,500, well above the entire conference membership when it organized twelve years before.³⁰

Junior camp got its launch at Pine Forge in 1948 as a joint effort of the Allegheny and Northeastern Conferences. Counselors led close to 100 campers aged 10 to 15 through "an intensified program of physical, mental and spiritual instruction" lasting eleven days.³¹

Along with the intensive efforts devoted to establishing the school and an institutional base at Pine Forge, Allegheny Conference fostered vigorous departmental work, evangelism, and local church development. Despite lacking sufficient equipment for effective evangelistic campaigns, Wagner reported 746 baptisms during his first two-year term, which concluded in 1947. Conference membership grew from 3,567 at the point of organization to 4,021, a net increase of 454. The church building debts for six congregations, totaling \$50,000 altogether, had been “obliterated.”³²

In addition to conference-wide gatherings, regional districts or federations were formed within the conference to foster the activities of various church organizations such as the youth or missionary volunteer society and the Dorcas Benevolent Services. The Dorcas ministry created five state or district federations to strengthen the work of the groups associated with individual churches and mobilize them for joint action. It generated thousands of items of clothing for post-war relief efforts overseas, bedding and supplies for Riverside Hospital in Tennessee, and equipment needed to set up a home economics at Pine Forge Institute. The three youth federations – Virginia, eastern states, and western states – proved especially effective, attracting participation second only to that of camp meeting.³³

During its second biennium, the conference’s net increase of 767 members brought the total to 4,788 by the end of 1949.³⁴ In December 1953, after guiding the Allegheny Conference through its first nine years, J.H. Wagner accepted a call to the presidency of the South Atlantic Conference.³⁵ By then, membership had increased by nearly another 1,000 to 5,821. The \$443,685 in tithe receipts more than doubled the total during the conference’s first year, 1945. The conference generated \$164,982 in support for foreign missions in 1953, nearly five times higher than the 1945 total of \$34,226.³⁶

Dynamic Continuity

William L. Cheatham, who had served for twelve years as pastor of the Berea Temple church in Baltimore, Maryland, the conference’s largest congregation, was elected as the new Allegheny Conference president. His 13-year administration (1954-1966) provided stability within which the conference could continue advancing along the lines established under his predecessor.

An Allegheny Conference Special issue of the *North American Informant* in 1961 provides some snapshots of the conference’s work during this era. Cheatham, writing early in 1961, reported a conference membership total of 8,679.³⁷ After slowing slightly to an average of 340 per year from 1954 through 1957, the net membership growth increased to about 500 per year for 1958 through 1960.³⁸ No doubt one reason for the accelerated growth rate was the highly successful of evangelistic campaigns conducted by E. E. Cleveland in Washington, D.C. in 1958 and C. D. Brooks in Cleveland, Ohio in 1960. While doubling its membership between 1945 and 1960, Allegheny Conference made no increases in administrative positions – the number of departmental secretaries (directors) and executive officers remained unchanged. During the same period, the number of

congregations increased from 40 to 71, and the number of pastoral-evangelistic workers in the field (ordained and licensed ministers and Bible workers) went from 33 to 51.

Literature evangelism, long an area of emphasis, was experiencing something of a heyday in 1961 and the years surrounding it. The Publishing Department anticipated a third straight year of sales over \$300,000. In his report at the General Conference session the following summer, F. L. Peterson, head of the North American Regional Department, asserted, "The Allegheny Conference leads the world field in literature sales."³⁹

The conference's first addition of a departmental leadership position came in 1961 when Jacob Justiss was assigned the Young People's Missionary Volunteer (MV) and Temperance departments. That allowed A. V. Pinkney to concentrate on the two other major areas of responsibility – education and media relations – that he had held along with MV for fifteen years. In addition to promoting summer youth camp and Pathfinders, Justiss organized participating churches into two basketball leagues – Eastern States and Western States.⁴⁰ Pinkney oversaw an expanding educational system. Enrollment in the secondary grades at Pine Forge Institute stood at 140 students, up from 30 in 1948. The conference's 49 church schools, five of which included the intermediate grades (9 and 10), enrolled 1,004 students.⁴¹

The second addition of a new position came in 1965. Walter M. Starks, who had pastored the Glenville church in Cleveland, Ohio and the Dupont Park church Washington, D.C. – two of the largest in the conference – was called upon to organize the new Stewardship department.⁴²

By 1966 the membership of Allegheny Conference reached 11,084, tripling since its beginning in 1945. The conference's flourishing contributed to sentiment that it be divided into two conferences, which had been the first choice of many in the first place. The sentiment was not unanimous, but the division was favored by a strong majority of 496-171 at a constituency meeting held in Baltimore on May 1, 1966.⁴³ The Allegheny Conference came to an end on December 31, 1966 but its legacy continued in two separate organizations, the Allegheny East Conference and Allegheny West Conference, both of which began operation on January 1, 1967.

Presidents

J. H. Wagner (1945-1953); W. L. Cheatham (1954-1966).

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