

Cleveland, Edward Earl (1921–2009)

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E.E. Cleveland was preeminent in Adventist public evangelism during the second half of the twentieth century. As an exceptionally gifted preacher who trained thousands of pastors, Bible instructors, and ministerial students in evangelistic methods, his ministry had a global reach that transcended race. At the same time his leadership was of singular significance for the American church's struggle to overcome its accommodation to racism during an era of rapid social change.



Edward Earl Cleveland

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

A Faithful Foundation (1921-1939)

Earl Cleveland's father, William Clifford Cleveland (1890-1956), was born April 6, 1890 in Wartrace, Tennessee. He grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he and Eunice Pettigrew (d. 1943) met in high school and married in 1916. They would also unite in lifelong dedication to the Seventh-day Adventist faith that William had embraced in 1915 after studying the Bible in conjunction with the book *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*.¹

Bill and Eunice Cleveland moved to Decatur, Alabama, where their first son, William James (1917-1991), was born. Soon thereafter, William C. Cleveland was drafted for military service in World War I, his plea for an exemption in order to provide for his wife and infant son denied. He withstood harsh intimidation in remaining faithful to his convictions as a noncombatant and Sabbath keeper.²

The Cleveland's second son, Edward Earl, was born March 11, 1921, in Huntsville, Alabama. Two years later, with a resurgent Ku Klux Klan making its presence felt in Huntsville, William Cleveland decided to move his young family to Chattanooga, where he found employment as the custodian for the Girls' Preparatory School and supplemented his income driving a truck to deliver coal, kindling wood, and other necessities. Another enterprise he developed was selling chipped ice in various flavors ("cool-outs") from a mobile cart.³ On June 2, 1928, a third son, Harold Lovell (1928-2007), joined the Cleveland family.⁴

Earl came to regard his father as a "giant oak" who, along with his "quiet Christian mother," provided a foundation for faithfulness.⁵ Though segregated, the racial climate in Chattanooga was not as intensely oppressive as in Alabama. Here, William Cleveland was a member of the Negro Voters League, an organization concerned with mobilizing black voting power, and took his sons to hear orators who exposed them to the ideals and rhetoric of freedom. He also forbade his sons from using the city's segregated public transportation services.⁶

William C. Cleveland served as elder at his church in Chattanooga for 34 years. All three of his sons became ordained ministers. William J. Cleveland would serve as president of the Southwest Region Conference (1969-1976) and Harold L. Cleveland as president of the Allegheny West Conference (1972-1983).⁷

From early boyhood, it was evangelists who captured Earl Cleveland's imagination. "I thought they were the greatest functionaries on earth, and I wanted to be one," he remembered.⁸ He started preaching at age six, delivering sermons written by his father at churches of various denominations in Chattanooga.⁹

Young Earl learned much about public speaking from his father, who was an effective preacher. From his mother he derived a facility for writing. Eunice Cleveland shied away from public speaking and was not a published author, but her correspondence demonstrated an ability to "turn a phrase." At an early age, Earl enjoyed writing poetry, and from his mother learned "the importance of catchy phrases, and the value of narrative and descriptive metaphors."¹⁰

Education, Marriage and Early Ministry (1939-1946)

After graduating from Howard High School in Chattanooga as co-valedictorian and class president, Earl took the two-year ministerial training at Oakwood Junior College (now Oakwood University) in Huntsville, Alabama. He thrived at Oakwood, where he held several leadership positions, including president of the senior class and editor of the student newspaper, the *Acorn*. During his final semester, Earl formed a relationship with Celia Marie Abney that would lead to marriage.¹¹ They had been schoolchildren together in Chattanooga, where Celia's father, Benjamin W. Abney, served as pastor until the Abneys left in 1931 for overseas mission service in South Africa.

During this era, C.E. Moseley, to whom students gave the honorific “rabbi,” was in charge of ministerial training at Oakwood. Moseley’s “sermonic style and substance was electric,” Cleveland wrote decades later.¹² While Cleveland was a student, though, the two often clashed. Being well-versed in the Bible, Earl believed “there was not, really, anything new a Bible teacher could teach me.” With that attitude, he acknowledged, “I made my Bible teacher miserable.”¹³ Moseley recognized his student’s prodigious gifts but in view of his attitude of self-assured independence, questioned whether he could succeed in denominational work. “The ministry is too small for you,” he warned Earl, “and I am afraid you will never get into it.”¹⁴

Thus, despite the early promise that seemed to destine Earl Cleveland for high achievement in evangelistic ministry, he faced hardship after graduating in 1941. While his peers were called to conference-salaried positions, he was passed over, likely because of reservations Moseley expressed to potential conference employers. Cleveland spent the summer of 1941 assisting W.R. Robinson with evangelistic meetings in Columbus, Ohio, and then, at Robinson’s suggestion, spent six months in self-supporting ministry for a small congregation in Toledo. Cleveland found a job provided by the National Youth Administration, the Depression-era government relief program, working in a furniture factory for \$15 per month. It was “an education in poverty” and the “hard facts of life” but he came to regard his months in Toledo as his most valuable experience in preparation for gospel ministry. For the first time, he doubted himself. He was no longer “the same self-confident debater of the Oakwood Bible classroom.”¹⁵

Eventually, a telegram arrived inquiring about his interest in an internship in the Carolina Conference, but he had to wait another three months before hearing whether the call would indeed be extended to him. During this time, his brother Bill, who was pastoring in Paducah, Kentucky, hired Earl to teach grades 1-3 in the church school.¹⁶

Finally, Earl Cleveland was called to the Carolina Conference in 1942 and assigned a district in North Carolina comprised of seven churches – Asheboro, Durham, Raleigh, Fayetteville, Lumberton and Laurinburg. Initially, he had to make do in this far-flung district without a car. “I would preach at 11 o’clock in Raleigh and catch the bus and preach at 4 o’clock in Fayetteville,” he explained. “The next Sabbath I would hit Lumberton and Laurinburg.”¹⁷

The loss of his mother, Eunice Cleveland, who died suddenly of a stroke in March 1943, was the first of several landmark events for the young preacher that year. On May 29, he married Celia Abney in Meridian, Mississippi.¹⁸ The newlyweds launched their marriage and joint ministry that summer in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where Cleveland conducted his first series of evangelistic tent meetings.

Storms blew the tent down twice, forcing postponement of opening night, and only 15 people showed up when it finally arrived, due to another round of hard, driving rain. But Cleveland refused to lower either the fervor of his preaching or his expectation of success. Though he had no funds available, he reserved airtime for a radio broadcast live at 9:15 Sunday mornings on WNCP in Fayetteville, promising to pay when he arrived for the first

broadcast. His church members responded enthusiastically with the funds needed for the broadcast. Meanwhile, Celia organized and conducted a 30-voice "radio chorus" that sang for the meetings as well. The choir mostly consisted of young people from the community not affiliated with the Adventist church. Many of these were among the 84 baptized by the end of the three-month series. The length of the series – six nights per week for twelve weeks – would become characteristic of Cleveland's work. Though shorter series would soon come into vogue, and Cleveland himself would conduct some, he always favored the "long campaign" of 12-14 weeks because it provided greater opportunity to win those who may initially resist.¹⁹

Another major precedent established in this first tent series was the crucial contribution of Celia Cleveland. In addition to homemaking for Earl and, eventually, their son, Earl Clifford (born 1954), Celia was nothing less than a co-minister with her husband. As pianist, vocalist and choir director, she excelled as a minister of music. As Bible instructor during a series, it was her role to visit with interested persons, study with them to insure their grasp of the church's biblical doctrines, and shepherd them through to baptism. Near the end of his career Earl characterized Celia as "the most fruitful" Bible instructor who ever worked with him, estimating that she "brought as many as 4,000 people to the water." But even beyond that he believed that her "best ministry" was in counseling. "Young people loved her and went to her for counseling. Older people would call the house and if I was not there [they would say], 'I'll talk to Mrs. Cleveland.' She knew how to pray with people, and talk with them, and help them with their problems."²⁰

After the Fayetteville series concluded, the radio broadcast continued another two years, with stations added in Raleigh and Durham along with a Bible correspondence school with 800 people eventually enrolled. Campaigns held in Raleigh in 1944 and in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1946 brought results that surpassed the Fayetteville effort.²¹

In between, though, a 1945 series in Durham brought only 13 new believers into the church, the least impressive numerical outcome of Cleveland's career for a "long campaign" conducted in America. Looking back twenty years later, Cleveland believed that he had learned a lasting lesson from the apparent failure. His initial successes had made him overconfident that he had "a sure fire procedure" so that he was "depending less and less on prayer and more and more on method."²²

Though Cleveland began his career in public evangelism in the segregated American South, he usually drew both white and black people and never segregated seating at his meetings.²³ Though admonished more than once by police to do so, he was never prosecuted for failing to heed their warnings. He also addressed race relations from a Christian standpoint. In sermons such as "The Negro and Bible Prophecy" and "Religion and Race" he named racial prejudice as "sin" and pointed out that "brotherhood" is "a Cardinal doctrine of the church."²⁴

Cleveland also, right from the start, made service to society – meeting the needs of the whole person – central to evangelism. He would put a large white barrel with the words “Love Thy Neighbor” painted on it in the tent. Then, starting the first night, he called for donations of food and clothing, and then organized distribution each Thursday to those in need in the surrounding community. He also arranged for medical personnel to provide free health care. Dr. Carl Dent of the Riverside Hospital operated by Adventists in Nashville, Tennessee, was especially helpful in this during Cleveland’s early ministry.²⁵

Southern Evangelist (1946-1954)

During his initial years in ministry, Cleveland dutifully fulfilled pastoral duties such as conducting funerals, marriages, member visitation and the annual Ingathering campaign to solicit funds from the community for the church’s worldwide work. But recognizing that his supreme passion and exceptional giftedness lay in public evangelism, conference leaders called him to a new role in 1946.

By then, Cleveland and his North Carolina congregations had been shifted from the Carolina Conference to the new South Atlantic Conference that began operation January 1, 1946. South Atlantic was one of the initial five “regional” or black conferences created to facilitate greater self-determination and leadership opportunity for black Adventists in conducting the work of the church in their communities. On July 23, 1946, Earl Cleveland’s calling to ministry was recognized with ordination and that same year he was designated the “conference evangelist” for South Atlantic. He was now freed from local pastoral responsibilities to conduct evangelism full-time throughout the wider scope of the South Atlantic Conference territory: the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida.

²⁶ In 1948 he and Celia acquired a trailer for housing during the next two and a half years of their itinerant ministry. “We are like the turtle, our house is on our backs,” Celia once commented as they moved to the next city.²⁷

Although Cleveland was still only in his mid-20s, his influence on young people who would become leaders in the Adventist cause was already beginning to figure prominently in the impact of his work. “I made it a point of placing beginning ministers who enter our conference with [Cleveland] for the evangelistic training, inspiration, and dedication to the cause of Christ I know they would receive by contact with him,” said H.D. Singleton, the South Atlantic Conference president.²⁸ Warren S. Banfield, Eric C. Ward, and George H. Rainey were among the future leaders of influence assigned to Cleveland during these early years.²⁹

In 1947, as Cleveland conducted his second major tent series in Greensboro, C.D. Brooks, just graduated from high school and headed for North Carolina A & T to study for dentistry, sat enthralled by the evangelist’s messages night after night. Suddenly, the 17-year-old was struck with the powerful impression that God was saying to him, “Charles, this is what I want you to do. I will help you make truth clear.” Brooks changed direction, headed to Oakwood to prepare for ministry, and during the subsequent six decades became one of the small handful of American Adventist evangelists whose impact would approximate that of Cleveland’s.³⁰

After Greensboro, Cleveland targeted Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in three successive campaigns that altogether added more than 300 new members to the ranks of Adventism. In 1950, he focused on Florida, where he again saw success with twelve-week campaigns in St. Petersburg, Orlando, and Gainesville.³¹

In 1950 Cleveland was called to serve as evangelist for the Southern Union Conference, comprised of the local conferences throughout the southern states of Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. It was a remarkable advance for a young man not yet 30 whose role would include instructing other ministers in evangelistic methods. Even more remarkable, for a black man at a time when the South remained legally segregated and Adventist institutions in the region followed suit, Cleveland's job portfolio would not be limited to the "colored work."

To be sure, his new position was defined as Southern Union evangelist for the two black conferences within the union (South Atlantic and South Central).³² However, the union president, V.G. Anderson, perceived as a "liberal" with regard to race relations, called upon Cleveland in 1951 to conduct a three-day workshop on the dynamics and methodology of evangelism for a large gathering of mainly white ministers and Bible instructors at the Southern Union Evangelism Council held in Panama City, Florida. Cleveland's claim that he thus became the first black man to teach white workers in an official capacity in the denomination's history seems plausible.³³

From this point forward, the incalculable impress that Cleveland would place on Adventist evangelism by training others would transcend racial and national boundaries. By the mid-1960s, white ministers comprised 70% of those who received his instruction at evangelistic institutes. By then he had also conducted institutes for ministers representing 42 nations on three continents outside of North America. His evangelistic campaigns in the United States had become field schools for seminarians at Andrews University and from time to time he also taught on the seminary campus.³⁴ In the mid-1990s the evangelist estimated that 1,600 ministers had received "the Cleveland Treatment."³⁵

In 1954, the preparatory work was well underway for an E.E. Cleveland campaign in Montgomery, Alabama, by the time of the General Conference session held in San Francisco, May 24 through June 5. At that session, Cleveland was elected associate secretary of the General Conference Ministerial Association. The director of the department, Roy Allan Anderson, wanted Cleveland to report directly to denominational headquarters in Washington, D.C., where his work would be teaching others evangelism rather than running tent efforts himself. Cleveland replied that doing evangelism was the best means of teaching it and that he would be heading directly from San Francisco back to Montgomery for a long campaign and would be giving thirteen young ministers "on-the-job-training" in the process. Anderson might need to "get another man," Cleveland suggested. Anderson, though initially taken aback, was amenable to his new colleague's course of action.³⁶

The Montgomery campaign turned out to be the first of the two most storied successes in Cleveland's career. Crowds ranging from 900 to 1100 flocked nightly to a tent, dubbed the "Canvas Cathedral," pitched at the corner of Smythe and High Streets, across from the Tijuana Night Club. Rosa Parks, whose refusal to yield her seat on a

city bus in compliance with racial segregation the following year would spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott, attended several nights. Two of Montgomery's leading ministers whom the boycott would catapult to the forefront of the national civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and Ralph David Abernathy of the First Baptist Church, also came to hear Cleveland. They had been summoned back from their vacations by warnings that a "black Billy Graham" was in town, "stealing sheep" from their congregations. After the meeting, they engaged Cleveland in an interchange about the relationship between Christ and the law that broke up soon after patrons departing the Tijuana Night Club, having freely imbibed, came over to join the discussion.³⁷

On September 11, eight Trailways buses with a police escort transported the first group of baptismal candidates, along with observers, from the tent to the baptismal site outside of town. "It was a magnificent sight, and made quite an impression on the inhabitants of Montgomery," reported W.W. Fordham, president of the South Central Conference. "In the first baptism 206 were buried with their Lord. These are some of the finest people in Montgomery."³⁸

The Montgomery series extended late into the Fall of 1954, ultimately resulting in the addition of 408 new members. Montgomery's black Adventist congregation, which became known as Bethany church, increased from 42 members prior to the evangelistic campaign to nearly 600 by March 1955 when a new house of worship that seated of 750 was completed.³⁹

Music always figured prominently in Cleveland's meetings and in connection with the Montgomery campaign he gave particular recognition to the Cathedral Quartet as a "real soul-winning agency, drawing many to the meetings who would not have attended otherwise."⁴⁰ Four Oakwood College ministerial students – James Edgcombe, Benjamin Reaves, William Scales, and E. Wayne Sheppard – formed the quartet. It would not be the last time the quartet enhanced Cleveland's evangelistic efforts, and each member would go on to make his own standout contribution to the Adventist cause – Edgcombe and Sheppard in ministerial and conference work, Reaves as Oakwood College president, and Scales in public evangelism.

World Evangelist (1954-1966)

The General Conference office that Cleveland became part of in 1954 was the headquarters of a denomination that had for decades accommodated itself to the pattern of race relations dominant in American society – legal segregation in the South, and in the rest of the country, the unofficial but nonetheless deep lines that kept a large gulf between the races in most aspects of life. Segregation prevailed at the nearby Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University) and Review and Herald Publishing Association. In fact, until 1949, the cafeteria in the Review and Herald used by General Conference personnel served white people only and thus was off limits to G.E. Peters, head of the North American Colored Department, and the handful of other black employees at denominational headquarters. And even thereafter, the management made black patrons

not employed by the denomination unwelcome while encouraging white customers from the community.⁴¹ The nearby Washington Sanitarium and Hospital excluded black patients, a policy reaffirmed by its board as late as December 14, 1953.⁴²

But change was in the air in 1954. In May the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, overturned the legal foundation of segregation. A month before the widely-expected ruling, the president of the General Conference, W.H. Branson, sent a letter to the administrators of Adventist conferences and institutions throughout North America, calling for an end to racial discrimination in all church organizations.⁴³ And, E.E. Cleveland's election as an associate secretary (director) of a department (the Ministerial Association) made him the first African American to hold a General Conference position outside of the department dedicated to the African American work (renamed the North American Regional Department in 1954).

From the beginning of his career Cleveland had pressed to advantage every opportunity to oppose racial discrimination in the church. He continued to do so now that a vaster scope of influence had been opened to him, both at the world church headquarters and wherever he traveled throughout the globe. As he interacted with white people who had little knowledge of black Americans, he took it as his "solemn duty to educate them to live around 'nonpassive' Blacks." As Cleveland saw it, his only alternative to being an "Uncle Tom" was to "become a missionary to the White folk."⁴⁴ He recognized that his confident bearing, sharp wit, and confrontational style made some people "insecure," but he never ridiculed or vilified those he sought to educate, and tried to act with diplomacy and redemptive intent.⁴⁵

Upon his arrival at the General Conference office, for example, Cleveland maneuvered to have a white female stenographer assigned to him. Despite obvious but unspoken signs of apprehension among his fellow church leaders about the arrangement, the outcome was that one of the deepest of racial phobias – that social proximity to a black man was inherently threatening to the purity of white women – was overcome without a fight and a lasting precedent set for desegregation of General Conference office personnel assignments.⁴⁶ In another instance, on the first day of his evangelism lectures for a three-day Florida Conference workers' meeting conducted at the Adventist-owned Florida Hospital in Orlando, Cleveland announced his intention to bring his wife and son to join the rest of the group for lunch in the segregated hospital cafeteria. But, in the interests of avoiding a controversy that threatened to spoil the workers' meeting, Cleveland agreed to the union president's proposal that if the Clevelands would eat elsewhere that first day, the president would ensure that new management that would desegregate the cafeteria and the hospital would be in charge the next day. Both men lived up to their part of the bargain.⁴⁷

Cleveland's first overseas assignment was in Kampala, Buganda, in 1957 where he was "to conduct a combination workshop-evangelistic program." The emphasis on training local workers in evangelism would become standard for his international work. The public meetings resulted in 104 baptisms but perhaps even more remarkable was the impact made on the royal family of Buganda, the largest of the kingdoms that would

soon comprise the independent nation of Uganda. The king's brother, Prince George Juko, along with five palace attendants and 17 students from the government college, were among the baptized. The prince's sister, Princess Adah Balirala, was baptized later, in 1965.⁴⁸

In 1959, Cleveland journeyed to West Africa, conducting campaigns with training in Monrovia, Liberia, and Accra, Ghana. The baptism count for both campaigns – 84 in Monrovia and 88 in Accra – was modest compared to the totals from Cleveland's American efforts.⁴⁹ In general, the larger significance of his overseas endeavors involved breakthroughs for Adventism in the lands he visited, new momentum generated, and the training of workers who would reap even larger results in the years ahead.⁵⁰

Cleveland's next overseas assignment took him behind the Cold War-era "iron curtain," to Warsaw, Poland, in 1960. Though thoroughly communist and loyal to the Soviet Union, Poland allowed Adventists a considerable measure of freedom. In addition to teaching evangelism to ministers from throughout the nation, Cleveland conducted a thirteen-night series. Though short by his standards, it brought 52 new members into the Adventist church. In Poland, and in his subsequent six weeks of preaching events throughout Finland and briefly in Denmark, Cleveland was once again a racial trailblazer – leading and teaching evangelism to Europeans.⁵¹

Mumbai, India, the locale of Cleveland's next overseas assignment, was the most difficult setting for public evangelism he had ever faced. The tally of 13 new members resulting from his campaign there in 1962, was the lowest of his career for long campaigns. Once again, the main impact was on the Indian workers. "We now find national evangelists baptizing 25, 35 and even 50 believers at the conclusion of their campaigns," reported R.S. Lowry, president the Southern Asia Division in 1966, a development he credited to the training Cleveland had provided.⁵²

Adventist work in Dar Es Salaam, the capital city of Tanzania, had just begun when Cleveland conducted his campaign there in 1963. A disproportionate impact on the well-educated and professional classes again became apparent. Of the 112 baptized, 13 were from a group of high-achieving university students who were being offered inducements from both the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War competition to gain the support of newly-independent nations.⁵³

In a 1965 visit to South Africa, then under the apartheid regime of rigid racial separation, Cleveland had, by his standards, a short preaching schedule. Under close surveillance from the regime's notorious Crime Intelligence Division (CID), he spoke to an integrated audience of 8,000 in the city hall of Cape Town, and was quoted in the *Cape Times* as saying: "Men have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, when will they learn to walk the earth like brothers."⁵⁴

In the United States, Cleveland's spectacular evangelistic achievements had previously been confined to the South. From his General Conference base, he now turned to the nation's largest and most influential cities, starting in Chicago (1956) and Washington, D.C. (1958), and did so with success that surpassed expectations.

Though the Washington campaign was unusual for its indoor venue, the Capitol Arena, and its spring time frame (March to May), it serves to highlight some of the factors that made Cleveland's large city evangelism compelling. Music, as always, played a crucial role, though the constellation of talent for the Washington campaign was especially brilliant. It included Joyce Bryant and Richard Penniman ("Little Richard"), both of whom had left stardom in popular music not long before to dedicate their talents to God's cause; the Cathedral Quartet; and a choir from the First and Ephesus churches in Washington churches conducted by Alma Blackmon.⁵⁵

As he typically did, Cleveland opened his twelve-week "Your Bible Speaks" series with a topic of current relevance to his target audience: "Religion and the Race Question – Was the Curse of Ham a Curse of Color?"⁵⁶ At the beginning of the fourth week, he began introducing distinctive Adventist teachings with "Adam's Mother's Birthday," intended to draw his listeners into considering the seventh-day Sabbath by first intriguing them about its origins at Creation. He then interspersed topics of more general Christian appeal with a gradual increase in topics calling for decision for or against the biblical claims that set Adventists apart from other Christian bodies.⁵⁷

The premium that Cleveland placed on interest-grabbing titles, adapting some to meet recent news headlines and the culture of Washington, D.C., can be seen in the following examples: "The Sputniks and Explorer Satellites – Will Man Completely Master Space?"; "Washington's Thirteen Most Outstanding Fools"; "The Wisest Black Man That Ever Lived and His Key to Happiness"; "The Man Who will Marry 2000 Years After His Death," and "The Devil's Vacation."

At the same time, Cleveland sought to keep catchy titles and other measures to stir interest in their place, avoiding sensationalism and harsh polemics and instead making Christ central to every message. "Night after night," the evangelist told his audience near the end of the Washington series, "you have heard my simple message – prepare to meet thy God. A reform must take place in the hearts of men; time is short....Christ in the life makes all the difference."⁵⁸ On Sabbath, May 3, 143 individuals were baptized, and subsequent services brought the total resulting from the campaign to 284.⁵⁹

Severe illness following a ruptured appendix threatened to sideline Cleveland from the major campaign planned for Los Angeles in the summer of 1961. By the time opening night arrived, he had recovered sufficiently but not entirely. Severe pain from adhesions forced him "to stand on one foot during the sermons to find relief," but he also recalled, with gratitude, "the integrated band of workers who stood by my side."⁶⁰ In addition to area church members, the band included 22 ministers, 15 Bible instructors, and 44 Andrews University seminary students who, along with ministers from Australia, South America, and Jamaica participated in the evangelism field school connected with the meetings. The total number of new believers – 319 – surpassed that of any previous Cleveland campaign other than Montgomery.⁶¹

Four years later Cleveland's campaign in Long Island, New York, defied expectations even more dramatically. Municipal regulations, long an obstacle to large tent meetings in greater New York City, almost defeated this one

until, at the last minute, permission came to set up two smaller tents side-by-side instead of the one larger tent originally planned. The meetings were promoted as “interfaith, interracial and interesting.” Cleveland described the campaign workforce as “a miniature United Nations.”⁶²

In the era of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s anti-poverty programs, Cleveland again used a “Love thy Neighbor” barrel as he had from the beginning to connect his campaigns with community need, but now expanded the effort and relabeled it “a 10-week miniature ‘war on poverty.’” The evangelist also followed his usual schedule of preaching six days per week, twice on Sabbaths. For six of the ten weeks, he also lectured three-and-a-half hours per day for the evangelism field school in which fourteen seminarians, including future North American Division (NAD) president Don C. Schneider, participated. Additionally, Cleveland was managing a team of 13 Bible instructors and 13 ministers. Though all of this was the norm for Cleveland, an observation by C.F. Warren, one of the associated ministers, in a report for the *Review* makes clear that such exertion was not without cost: “As the effort progressed, the strain and demands upon our speaker became oppressive.” Attendance averaged 1,400 per night, except for Sunday nights, when standing room only crowds close to 3,000 were the norm. The Long Island campaign led 401 new believers into the church in addition to 55 who were rebaptized.⁶³

Cleveland’s most remarkable evangelistic success came in 1966 in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. Public evangelism had not been notably fruitful in this cosmopolitan, relatively prosperous Caribbean city. The baptism of 64 people in a recent evangelistic effort had been celebrated as a major success.⁶⁴

The Inter-American Division (IAD) leadership had high hopes that the Cleveland campaign would demonstrate the possibility of a higher order of results and that the evangelism field school accompanying it would invigorate evangelism throughout the division. Two large tents were pitched in anticipation of an attendance averaging around 2,000. But no one, including Cleveland, expected the overwhelming response. Opening night drew more than 3,000. The momentum built, with 4,500 attending on the second Sunday night of the series, and continued to increase, reaching 7,000 for the final meeting. It seemed a “Pentecostal experience,” resulting in 812 new members by the time Cleveland’s 12-week series concluded at the end of November. A follow-up series conducted by Cleveland protégé G.H. Rainey brought in another 400. IAD president C.L. Powers later reported that 1,222 baptisms resulting from the consecutive Cleveland-Rainey campaigns.⁶⁵

Though it would be surpassed numerically by mass baptisms in more recent decades, the “Trinidad triumph” brought an influx of new members unprecedented in Seventh-day Adventist history. Cleveland naturally saw divine power as the source of the triumph, but he also credited the strategy that he and his Ministerial Association colleagues were calling “coordinated evangelism.” This meant “total commitment” to the campaign on the part of every department of the union conference and local conference, the church’s medical professionals, and a large, well-organized body of lay workers.⁶⁶

The impact of the Trinidad triumph on the Adventist church at large was perhaps its greatest significance. The 46 ministers in the evangelism field school implemented what they had learned in their respective fields throughout the IAD, with several seeing markedly greater evangelistic success. More broadly, it generated a spirit of higher expectations and higher results for public evangelism, causing church leaders to see it as the pivotal moment leading to the IAD's explosive membership growth. In the decade that preceded the Trinidad campaign (1956-1966), IAD membership showed an increase of 73% from 115,00 to just under 200,000. But in the decade after the campaign (1967-1977), the IAD more than doubled from 211,000 to 478,000, a 126% increase. As of 2019, the division membership stood at 3.7 million.⁶⁷

Evangelizing Through a Great Revolution (1967-1977)

Based on his years of experience, unparalleled evangelistic achievements, and leadership ability, E.E. Cleveland appeared to be the most qualified by far to replace Roy Allan Anderson as head of the General Conference Ministerial Association when the latter retired in 1966. When a less-accomplished white man was put into the position instead at the General Conference session held that year in Detroit, Michigan, many observers found it difficult to escape the conclusion that Cleveland had been treated unfairly based on racial considerations. Though if elected he would have attained another "first" – this time as the first black person to lead a General Conference department (outside the Regional Department), Cleveland denied being surprised or disappointed.⁶⁸

Whether or not the turn of events in 1966 played a significant role, Cleveland's tone on racial issues began to change from that point forward. While the evangelist could claim to have been "a part of every liberation effort the church had made since 1954,"⁶⁹ his rhetoric had tended to highlight the positive advances the church made, causing some black Adventists to view him as a "defender of the establishment." But by the end of the 1970s, "many looked upon him as the most strident of the more militant wing of Black Seventh-day Adventist leadership," according to Calvin B. Rock, a younger colleague of Cleveland's in church leadership who has written extensively on the struggle for racial parity in Adventism.⁷⁰

Cleveland's greater sharpness on racial issues also coincided with changes in American society. Widespread outbreaks of violent protest shifted the focus of the movement for racial justice to the large cities and to systemic suppression of economic opportunity. For urban black Adventists, the civic disturbances posed a threat to quality of life as well as to church-owned property. At the same time, the new emphasis of the civil rights movement on tangible human need – education, health, and welfare – created a niche that Adventists were well-positioned to fill. Cleveland's role of representing Adventism to black America thus required even greater attention to showing how Adventism spoke to societal issues. And, his mission of educating the Adventist church at-large expanded beyond how to interact with black people as individuals to understanding racial injustice in society and in the church and why addressing them was essential to the mission of Adventism.

The extended period of civil strife in Detroit in the summer of 1967 signaled the urgency and efficacy of a prompt response on the part of the church. At the prompting of Cleveland and W.W. Fordham, director of the North American Regional Department, the General Conference provided \$2,000 to help fund use of the South Central Conference disaster relief van (the only one owned by a regional conference) to support Adventist work in providing food and other essential supplies desperately needed by residents whose normal access to them had been cut off by the disturbances. The Adventist welfare center operated by the City Temple church in the heart of the conflict zone remained standing while surrounding buildings were damaged or destroyed.⁷¹ In some other locales, however, attacks targeted black Adventist church buildings because of the church's perceived lack of support for the racial cause. In most instances the property damage was minor, but the Ethnan Temple church in Pittsburgh was leveled entirely. In other cities, threats had been issued.⁷²

With a view toward recurring urban unrest in 1968, the denomination's 1967 Annual Council voted an Inner City program to make possible "a more meaningful and wider scope of service to the city."⁷³ In an article published in major black newspapers near the end of January 1968, Cleveland portrayed prophetic Christianity – including the witness of the pioneers of Adventism – as a source of the positive aspects of "the revolution within the Negro community," namely "the new awareness of the dignity and worth and significance of the individual." With this knowledge of Christianity's contribution to the civil rights movement, Cleveland declared, "we can face the long, hot summer of 1968, and may it be, Christianity's finest hour."⁷⁴

On April 4, 1968, at its annual Spring Meeting, the General Conference Committee finalized approval of an emergency appropriation of \$100,000 to fund denominational inner-city service projects.⁷⁵ That same evening Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, triggering violent protests in cities throughout the nation. Cleveland, who was conducting a week of prayer at Andrews University in Michigan, flew back immediately to Washington, D.C. to be on the ground for the Adventist response. Fires raged for several days, destroying hundreds of businesses and homes in the nation's capital, leaving thousands suddenly with nowhere to buy food and other essentials. Cleveland worked with the First Church, the Adventist church located closest to the most devastated portion of the city, whose lay leaders had quickly organized distribution of food and clothing from the church, which the city soon declared an official emergency center.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the Poor People's campaign that King had been leading continued with his successor as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, leading a caravan of about 500 core participants as it made the remainder of the journey from Marks, Mississippi, to Washington, D.C. The South Central Conference mobile unit accompanied the caravan, providing free medical services. On May 12, campaign participants began streaming into Washington to set up "Resurrection City" – a tent city on the national mall that would be the base from which they would demonstrate and lobby the federal government on behalf of economic justice and equal opportunity.

Cleveland declined a request from campaign organizers to oversee feeding of the Resurrection City campers but arranged a \$15,000 donation from the General Conference to supply beds and blankets. The New Jersey Conference mobile van was used to distribute these supplies along with about 5,000 personal-item kits prepared by volunteers in Takoma Park. The South Central van was the sole provider of medical care within the boundaries of Resurrection City, where it remained for the entire six weeks of the encampment.⁷⁷

Cleveland was onsite as a volunteer, donning an Adventist Health and Welfare Service uniform after a full-day's work at the General Conference office, and heading for Resurrection City where he sometimes worked until after midnight amidst the incessant rain that turned the encampment into a sea of mud. Yet, he relished the experience of Adventists rendering a "ministry of love" with such visibility on the national stage. It won appreciation from civil rights leaders who could see the Adventist work as a useful contribution to shared goals. And, according to Cleveland's observations, at Resurrection City Adventists became "the focal point of humanitarianism through which 15 or 16 other denominations funneled their aid to the needy."⁷⁸

Though the work of social benevolence had a strategic purpose here, as it did in connection with his evangelistic campaigns, Cleveland insisted that it came from a higher mandate. When asked by a talk-show host if such action was intended to "gain converts," Cleveland responded: "Few of the people who are recipients of our aid ever join our church. We are doing this because we must. Divine love requires it. The church cannot sit unaffected as an island of prosperity in a sea of human need. We minister to human need because it is there, and as a church, we love."⁷⁹

Though he had long demonstrated his proficiency as an author with numerous articles in denominational periodicals, Cleveland first book, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, based on sermons from his evangelistic campaigns, was published by Review and Herald in 1968. Among the fifteen more that would follow, *Free at Last* (Review and Herald, 1970) related the gospel of Christ to the black experience, as did *Living Soul: "We Shall Overcome"* (Southern Publishing, 1972), and *No Stranger Now* (Pacific Press, 1972), which presented a concise overview of black history and the civil rights movement.⁸⁰ "His writing is just as apt, and folksy, and gifted, and entertaining as his public address, and he is a master at both," observed C.E. Moseley.⁸¹

His book *The Middle Wall* (Review and Herald, 1969) was remarkable for the force and clarity with which it made the case for Adventist involvement in the public issues that were stirring the nation. He directly countered reasons for avoiding such involvement that had been repeated in Adventist publications for decades, such as avoiding the dangers of the social gospel. This line of thought of thought, he contended, had led to a "a type of self-righteous inertia" that was equally bad: "The professors of this philosophy would watch the world collapse at their feet, proclaiming, 'We told you so.' These unhappy purveyors of misery are not the servants of God." In responding to cautions about avoiding entanglements of church and state, another oft-repeated argument, Cleveland maintained that "human welfare and civil freedom" are "the business of both church and state."⁸²

Cleveland continued evangelizing full-tilt through the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s with an alertness to the times and to community needs that made for success in two cities where the upheavals had hit hardest. The Black Panther Party held sway over sections of Oakland, California, when Cleveland conducted his campaign there in 1970. The evangelist thought it prudent to seek the blessing of the party chairman, Bobby Seale, to hold the meetings in the Oakland Alameda auditorium and use a mobile unit (once again, South Central's van) to provide medical and dental services and conduct a "feed-the-hungry" program. After Seale's emissary inspected the operation and reported back to Panther headquarters, permission was granted.⁸³

The fact that the Black Panther party was known for a philosophy of racial self-determination and for asserting the right to armed self-defense made it particularly striking that the Oakland campaign was reported as the most thoroughly integrated that Cleveland had conducted yet. Attendance was evenly divided between black and white, along with a noticeable portion of Spanish-speaking people. Some had questioned the wisdom of the white-administered Northern California Conference giving its full support and participation to a campaign where "various radical elements" held influence.⁸⁴ But, N.R. Dower, director of the General Conference Ministerial Association, called the campaign "an object lesson to the world that black and white can function together meaningfully in an age of racial tension."⁸⁵ The campaign was also a success by the numerical measure of 250 baptisms.

The campaign held in Detroit in 1972 was likewise remarkable as an interracial effort in a city where eruptions of violence in response to racial oppression were still a recent memory. A large, mobile medical van, this time from the Southwest Region Conference, was once again used to offer services, parked in a different place each day in the neediest section of the city. Security posed a problem, but the positive experience with the Black Panthers in Oakland prepared the way for a solution: the Panthers readily agreed to guard the van, and volunteer physicians and nurses of both races served without incident for the entire eight weeks of the campaign.⁸⁶ After reporting an influx of 213 new members, with another baptismal service still to take place, Dower observed: "It was an interconference, interracial, and international operation....Men and women from the suburbs mingled freely with people of the inner city as they came nightly to hear the Word of the Lord."⁸⁷

The Detroit effort would be the evangelist's last long campaign during his tenure at the General Conference Ministerial Association. He declined to cooperate with the efforts of some of his colleagues to make him a vice-president of the General Conference in 1972. "I refused to be promoted out of the area of my competence," he said. "The most effective and satisfying thing I have ever done is standing under the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching the gospel." He added that "committees have always bored me; I would have been miserable in that setting."⁸⁸

Instead of higher office, Cleveland's duties in the Ministerial Association shifted to that of public evangelism coordinator for the NAD. The denomination had launched a new program in 1972, Mission '72, in which hundreds of speakers throughout the nation began their campaigns at the same time, with a full package of

advertising and promotional resources accessible to all. As NAD coordinator for Mission '73 and subsequent annual initiatives under the same rubric, much of Cleveland's energies were devoted to promoting involvement in the public evangelism plan at conference and union ministerial gatherings. He envisioned "every Adventist pastor, minister, or administrator becoming an evangelist."⁸⁹ And, he continued his own direct involvement in public evangelism, albeit in shorter campaigns, such as in Houston (1974) and Chicago (1975), that yielded scores of baptisms. He also continued a heavy schedule of preaching for camp meetings, weekend revivals, and other special events.⁹⁰

Oakwood and Advocacy (1977-2009)

Two issues – Ellen White's legacy and a proposal for black union conferences – stood out in Cleveland's intensified advocacy for racial justice in church governance during his final decade at the General Conference. Discovery that Ellen White's will designated a percentage of the royalties from her books for the church's mission to black people in the South prompted Cleveland and other black Adventist leaders to call upon the General Conference to rectify the unfulfilled obligation.

Arthur White, the prophet's grandson and director of the Ellen G. White Estate explained that due to the estate's debt at the time of Ellen White's death in 1915, the financial provisions for the beneficiaries could not be carried out. The will became a "dry trust," and "by agreement" subsequent royalties went to the General Conference and were used to support the White Estate and the church's worldwide work.⁹¹

Nevertheless, Neal C. Wilson, General Conference vice president for North America, advocated a plan to at least partially fulfill the will's intent regarding the black Adventist work, even though the church was not legally bound to do so. He proposed creation of a Regional Capital Reversion Fund, by which a percentage of tithe would revert to union conferences on a rotating basis to support the black work in their respective territories with grants for building projects and educational scholarships. As a member of the finance committee whose recommendation would be decisive at the 1970 Annual Council, Cleveland succeeded in countering strong opposition to the plan from some administrators.⁹² In 1977, for example, the reversion fund provided \$231,700 for use in the Allegheny East and Allegheny West conferences in the Columbia Union and the Lake Region Conference in the Lake Union.⁹³

Cleveland believed that white Adventists had long "*misread, misunderstood, and misapplied* the writings of our prophet, feeling that she has sanctioned their prejudice."⁹⁴ He vigorously supported publication of Ronald D. Graybill's book *E.G. White and Church Race Relations* (Review and Herald, 1970) as a much-needed and long-overdue breakthrough to a more complete and appropriately contextualized understanding.

While Cleveland had long celebrated and put into action the ideals of racial integration and interracial cooperation in the church, he was also a realist about the majority race in any human institution consistently implementing those ideals on equal terms for all. "A measure of self-determination must accompany

integration, or it will ever lead to minority frustration,” he contended.⁹⁵

An enthusiastic champion of regional (black) conferences, Cleveland gave strong support to a proposal that emerged in 1969 for black unions as the next logical step in self-determination as the path to racial equity in the denominational. Cleveland pointed to the very limited future leadership opportunities for black ministers after they had served as presidents of regional conferences, and to the barriers that being in separate, white-dominated unions placed against crucial initiatives for which the united strength of the black conferences was needed. For these and other reasons, the evangelist contended in 1970 that “organization of ‘regional’ (black) union conferences is crucial to the survival of the Seventh-day Adventist church as an effective force among blacks.”⁹⁶

The black union plan, a subject of intense debate for ten years, ultimately did not gain acceptance. “The church rolled on,” to quote the refrain from Cleveland’s 1997 autobiography. But he continued to believe that it had failed to make an important advance and that measures to increase black involvement in the leadership of the existing union conferences, though welcome, were inadequate.⁹⁷

Cleveland was elected to another term at the General Conference Ministerial Association in 1975, but tension over his sharp and persistent outspokenness on black unions and other issues likely contributed to his departure in 1977, with three years remaining in his term, to take a position at Oakwood College. Cleveland cited a different reason for leaving Washington, D.C., and the denomination’s world headquarters after 23 years: His wife Celia had begun suffering from arthritis in 1971 and with her condition worsening, Earl became convinced that it was time for him to find a position that required less travel so that he could be with her more of the time.⁹⁸

At Oakwood, Cleveland headed the Department of Church Missions that administered the school’s student missionary program. His extensive experience traveling overseas served him well in troubleshooting problems and orienting students for their one-year assignments. He found the most satisfaction, though, in teaching courses in Dynamics of Christian Living, Evangelism, and Christian Broadcasting.⁹⁹

Though he had refused to be muzzled at the General Conference, Cleveland now had even greater freedom to speak and write on behalf of racial justice in the church. A monthly column in the *Regional Voice* in particular gave him a platform for protest that was “frank, direct, insightful, and without fear of sanction, political or otherwise.”¹⁰⁰

Evangelism remained paramount, though. In 1978 he conducted a nine-week campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, where his brother, W.J. Cleveland was pastor of the large Ephesus Church. More than 200 were baptized by the end of the series, leading to the formation of a new congregation, the South Park Church.¹⁰¹ A campaign in Columbus, Ohio, in 1982 brought Earl into association with his other brother, Harold J. Cleveland, who was president of the Allegheny West Conference, headquartered in that city. It was similarly fruitful, with 197 baptized.¹⁰² In 1990, the 69-year-old evangelist pitched his Canvas Cathedral for the final time, conducting a

six-week tent series in Nashville, Tennessee, credited with 206 baptisms.¹⁰³

Cleveland is recognized as the principle initiator of the Council on Evangelism, first held at Oakwood in 1979. Later renamed the Pastoral Evangelism and Leadership Council (PELC), this annual conference has been a powerful means for fostering the commitments to which Cleveland dedicated his life. Rooted in African American Adventism, PELC's appeal and influence as a resource for renewal and growth in ministry would broaden to include other sectors of the church, and by the 2010s was drawing 1,200 to 1,500 pastors, Bible workers, chaplains, and church leaders each year.¹⁰⁴

Cleveland retired from full-time service in 1986, but kept on preaching, teaching, and writing at a vigorous pace for more than twenty years to come. He and Celia continued to live in Huntsville. Their son Earl and his wife, Pinkie, had two sons – a source of joy to their grandparents. Celia Cleveland passed away on May 31, 2003, two days after their 60th anniversary. The octogenarian evangelist had one more campaign in him – a four-week series in 2006 at the Abundant Life Seventh-day Adventist church in Las Vegas, Nevada, pastored by Dr. Calvin B. Rock.

On August 30, 2009, Edward Earl Cleveland passed away at the age of 88. He rests from his labors beside Celia in the Oakwood University Memorial Gardens in Huntsville, Alabama.

Legacy

Much evidence suggests that the global impact E.E. Cleveland made on Seventh-day Adventist public evangelism and church growth surpasses that of any other individual born in the twentieth century. In a career that began in America's segregation era, reached its zenith during the Civil Rights era, and continued to thrive during the subsequent decades of struggle against systemic racism, no one did more than Cleveland to prod his church out of its complicity with the nation's racial sins or to engage black America with the Adventist message. Nor has any Adventist shown more clearly than Cleveland, by precept and example, how the work of evangelism in leading individual sinners to salvation through Jesus Christ is inseparable from Christ-like action for justice and mercy in society.

Awards and recognitions constitute one index to E.E. Cleveland's legacy. Some of the most significant were:

Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws from Daniel Payne College, May 29, 1968.

Honorary Degree of Doctor of Divinity from Andrews University, June 2, 1968.

Recognition as Alabama's Most Distinguished Black Clergyman from Guy Hunt, Governor of Alabama, March 8, 1989.

Induction into the Martin Luther King, Jr. Collegium of Preachers and Scholars at Morehouse College, 1993.

Award in Recognition of Exemplary Services to the Huntsville/Madison County Branch of NAACP, June 3, 1993.

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Award, from the Greater Huntsville Interdenominational Ministerial Fellowship, January 15, 1995.¹⁰⁵

The Bradford-Cleveland-Brooks Leadership Center, a wing added to the C.E. Moseley Religion Complex at Oakwood University providing leadership development for Adventist ministers, established in 2007.

Numbers, also, are telling: 67 countries on six continents visited to preach the gospel; at least 60 public evangelistic campaigns; an estimated 15,000 baptized and 1,600 ministers trained; 16 books and two Sabbath School quarterlies authored.¹⁰⁶

Even more telling, the testimony of those who worked with him. In 1966, W.W. Fordham stated that Cleveland had "the unique ability to articulate, perhaps more clearly and more vividly, the unique facets and purpose of our message than any of his contemporaries...and has done more than any other man in the past two decades to give momentum to global evangelism."¹⁰⁷

When Cleveland retired in 1986, Calvin B. Rock, by then vice president of the General Conference, wrote: "We occasionally are blessed with the ministry of those whose careers are epochal, who make an impact upon established patterns of functioning in ways that are substantive and enduring. They are the few whose labors effect the expansion of our parameters, rare leaders who have been equipped by God for special service." E. Earl Cleveland, Rock affirmed, was one of the few to "qualify for such description."¹⁰⁸

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NOTES

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21. Rogers, 45-46; Lee and Sahlin, 13.
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23. *LCR*, chap. 9
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