

Read, Walter Edwin (1883–1976)

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Pastor Walter Edwin Read worked for the church as a colporteur, evangelist, missionary worker, departmental secretary, publishing house manager, and president of the British Union Conference, Northern European Division, and the Caribbean Union Conference, as well as General Field Secretary for the General Conference.

Early Years and Work in Wales

Read was born to John and Kate Read on November 17, 1883, in Southampton, England. His father was a plasterer.¹ Read studied at a private school from

1884-1889.² The family moved to Wales in 1889, where John Read ran a shoe shop in Newport from 1891 to 1901 after which he became a coal miner. In 1889 Walter was enrolled into a public school where he stayed until 1897.³ He became a Christian in 1895 in the Baptist Church and accepted the Advent message in 1902 after attending evangelistic tent meetings run by Albion Ballenger and reading the *Present Truth* magazine.⁴ In March 1903, he was baptized into Adventist faith in Newport Bay, Wales.⁵ When he was baptized, he was working as a manager of a home and colonial grocery shop, while working as colporteur in his free time.

In 1905 Walter Read enrolled as a student at Duncombe Hall Missionary College, London, which was owned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He met his future wife and fellow student Emily Mary Powell at the school. He graduated in 1906.⁶ Immediately after his studies he went to South Wales to work as an evangelist.⁷ In 1909 he was assigned to work as a minister/evangelist in North Wales.⁸ On March 4, 1909, Read married Emily Powell



Walter Read

Photo courtesy of Graham Barham from family collection.

in Newport, Wales, and the same day they traveled to Wrexham, Denbighshire, which was to be their appointed field of work.⁹

In 1911 H. E. Armstrong reported:

During the last month new work has been opened up in Denbigh, North Wales, and our Brother and Sister Read are taking charge of the effort. They have secured a hall where public meetings are being held three times each week, and the attendance so far has been very encouraging. It was with some difficulty that the hall could be secured, owing to the report that went forth that our work was connected with the Mormons. The Lord, however, helped the workers to overcome this difficulty, and to remove from the minds of the people this stigma.¹⁰

Work and Career (1912-1936)

On May 20, 1912, it was reported in *The Missionary Worker* that Read had traveled to Ireland in November 1911 to join the missionary work there.¹¹ Read was ordained on a Sabbath at the Annual Session of the Irish Mission held in Belfast on March 20-22, 1914.¹² At the session A. E. Armstrong reported the following about Read's work in Ireland: "He had worked in Portadown, and from there had gone to Lurgan. Little result had attended either of these efforts. He was at present holding an effort at Lisburn and had a fair interest, twenty-six regularly attending the Sunday night service."¹³ Despite the difficulties and the limited results, Read continued his efforts in Ireland until 1916 when he was elected Secretary of the Sabbath School and Young People's departments at the British Union Conference Session held in Derby on August 3-8.¹⁴

In 1918 the Adventist Publishing House (later known as Stanborough Press) was looking for a manager. Mr. White had departed to America, and Mr. Sisley was also expected to leave. They could not find an experienced manager in any of the other publishing houses. The British Union Committee voted to appoint Read as manager of the publishing house.¹⁵ He continued at the publishing house until he was elected president of the South England Conference at the British Union Conference Session in Battersea, South London, on July 29-August 8, 1921.¹⁶

That appointment did not last long as, on December 20, 1922, Read reported in *The Missionary Worker* that he was on his way to the new European Division office in Berne, Switzerland, to work as a Foreign Mission Secretary:

It is Sunday morning. In a few hours we expect to entrain for the continent to locate at the division headquarters at Berne before leaving for our new home. We are rapidly nearing the end, and if the message is to accomplish its work in this field in the short time that is left to us, nothing short of mighty miracles must be wrought. We should earnestly pray that God will prepare our own hearts for the outpouring of the latter rain and then, as His people press into service with consecrated hearts, we shall see the fulfilment of what the servant of God has

said over and over again; that hundreds will be brought into the truth.¹⁷

The division headquarters had previously been located temporarily in Denmark. At the recommendation of the General Conference, the division office was moved to Berne, Switzerland, in October 1922.¹⁸

In 1932 at the British Union Conference Session in London, February 29-- March 6, 1932, Read was elected president of the British Union Conference.¹⁹

In April 1932 Read wrote in *The Missionary Worker*:

If because of lack of means we are unable to carry forward the work in ways we have been accustomed to, then we must find other ways. It is certainly not the will of God that His work should cease, or even be hindered, because we are not able to spend large sums of money in hall rents and in advertising. His work must and will go forward anyway. What wonderful results might be accomplished by the Lord through His people if at this time we go to work with a will and with hearts and lives fully yielded and wholly surrendered to His service.²⁰

Read wrote his New Year's resolve for 1933 in *The Missionary Worker*,

That I will this year endeavour, by God's help, to live a simple, sincere, and active Christian life; repelling promptly every thought of discontent, discouragement, impurity, and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity, and the habit of holy silence; exercising economy in expenditure, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust, and a childlike faith in God. I will endeavour to spend some time in Bible study and prayer each day, and to make a personal effort at least once a week to encourage or draw some one nearer to Christ.²¹

To draw nearer to God and spend more time with him was a goal that Read strove for throughout his life, and he always encouraged others to seek the same.

On February 8, 1935, Read made several positive announcements in *The Missionary Worker* regarding achievements in the British Union Conference:

We are very glad to report that we received into membership 452 by baptism and vote. Quite a number of our faithful members were laid to rest to await the call of the Life-giver, others walk no more with the Advent people; and so the net gain for the year is 157. If we think of the past three years, we find that the net gain for the period is 452, whereas for the preceding three-year period, that is, for the years 1929, 1930, 1931, the net gain was 270... increase in both tithes and offerings for 1934. Compared with the previous year, the figures are as follows: Tithes for 1933 amounted to £24,322 and for 1934, £25,323, which is an increase of £1,001. The total mission offerings for 1933 were £16,137, but for 1934 they amounted to £16,522, showing the splendid increase of £385... the evangelistic efforts which are being conducted in various parts of the field is very encouraging indeed. Excellent attendances are reported from almost every centre, and a good interest is being shown. Thousands of names are on the visiting lists.²²

Membership in the British Union Conference was growing, tithes and offerings were increasing, and the evangelistic efforts were proving a success.

The Northern European Division and the Second World War

At the General Conference Session, held in San Francisco, California, May 26 to June 11, 1936, Read was elected as president of the Northern European Division.²³ He was the first national of the region to be elected president of the division.²⁴

On September 1, 1939, the Second World War broke out when Hitler invaded Poland.²⁵ One year later Read wrote the following in *The British Advent Messenger*.

This is God's counsel to us in these days of peril. We have the promises of God which are sure and certain, promises which never can fail. Let us bear in mind continually that there hath not failed one word of all His good promises. Let us commit our lives to the loving care of an all merciful heavenly Father. May the Lord give us courage and hope in these days of uncertainty. Where there is danger on the right hand and on the left, may we know that our security is in the Lord God of hosts, whose word never fails, who is always true to His promise.²⁶

At the General Conference Session held in June 1941, it was decided to establish a temporary headquarters of the Northern European Division at the General Conference offices.²⁷ The decision was taken due to the war situation in Europe. Almost all the division staff were employed by the British Union Conference, while others were reassigned elsewhere or were laid off. Only four people remained in the division office: W. T. Bartlett (company secretary of World Wide Advent Mission Ltd. or WWAM), C. H. Anscombe (G. C. Transportation agent and treasurer of WWAM Ltd.), Miss Schmidt (stenographer employed by WWAM) and Mr. W. James, a retired church worker. The Northern European Division buildings were leased out. The only building that was excepted from this was the division office in Edgware, London, where WWAM was located.²⁸ Read and his wife arrived in Washington from England after having spent 22 days at sea.²⁹

Read was present on January 15, 1942, at the General Conference Executive Committee meeting, held at the General Conference office. At this meeting a "temporary" reorganization of the Northern European Division was voted.³⁰ Following the meeting the General Conference Committee issued the following statement in the *Review and Herald*:

Whereas, present world conditions make it impossible for the Northern European Division to function as in normal times, the administrative staff and committee being scattered and cut off from contact with their territory and from the opportunity for counsel with one another: We recommend, 1. That during the present emergency the administration of all the territories of the Northern European Division be by and under the direction of the General Conference Committee in Washington. 2. That W. E. Read's resignation as vice-president of the Northern European Division be accepted, and that he be appointed a field secretary of the General

Conference. Elder and Mrs. Read will locate in Washington.³¹

Read wrote the following in the *Advent Review and Herald* on August 13, 1942:

We must see the unprecedented prospects before us in the great work of evangelism. We should pray for a larger vision of the work of God, for we are on the eve of the greatest developments we have ever seen in the history of the advent movement. Plans for a great work will include the preparation of men for the work overseas. It will mean laying plans for returning many of our missionary families to their fields of labor as soon as conditions permit. It really means that in such a time as this we must think in larger terms than ever before in our plans to co-operate with God in the finishing of His work on earth. So, brethren and sisters, in this day of world upheaval, let us hold steady in our thinking. Let us not limit the Holy One of Israel in any expression of unbelief, but let us with courage and confidence in the purpose of God, go forward, giving, sacrificing, working, and praying.³²

Despite the war situation in Europe, Read remained positive, strong in his faith, and encouraged others to continue the evangelistic work.

Work and Career (1942-1957)

At the General Conference Autumn Council in Cincinnati, Ohio, October 20-28, 1942, Read was appointed to work in the Inter-American Division as president of the Caribbean Union Conference.³³ In 1946 he returned to Washington D. C. to work as Field Secretary for the General Conference.³⁴ In 1952 Read was appointed as chairman for the Biblical Research Committee of the General Conference, a position he held until 1958.³⁵

In the mid 1950's the author and minister Walter R. Martin was asked by the Zondervan Publishing Company, an evangelical publisher, to write a book exposing Seventh-day Adventists as a non-Christian cult. Martin contacted T. Edgar Unruh, who at the time was the president of the East Pennsylvania Conference, to ask him if he could put him in contact with Adventists who could answer his questions. Not long after this, a series of dialogues began, which involved LeRoy Froom, R. Allan Anderson, and Read, representing the Seventh-day Adventist Church; and Martin, George E. Cannon, Donald Grey Barnhouse, Donald Grey Barnhouse Jr., and Russel Hitt, representing the evangelicals. The evangelicals asked questions, and the Adventists answered them.³⁶ One result of these dialogues was the publishing of "Questions on Doctrine" in 1957 by the Review and Herald.³⁷ The book was published with the idea of answering specific questions by scholars and representatives of other Christian denominations regarding the Adventist faith. It was distributed among Adventist church members but soon became an object of controversy when an Adventist educator disagreed on the answers given to certain aspects of the sanctuary and the human nature of Christ. Despite this opposition, the book has been reprinted and is still used today.³⁸

Retirement

In 1957, at the age of 74, Read applied to receive sustentation.³⁹ In answering the questions on the sustentation form, where the form asked: "Has active work ceased?" Read answered "No." "Is cessation from active service due to age or impaired health?" Read's answer, "Neither." "To what extent are you still able to labor in denominational work?" Read's answer, "Just as much as the brethren care to give me."⁴⁰ In 1972, Read's wife died.⁴¹

Read celebrated his 90th birthday on November 1973, with a group of friends and associates at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hugo Christiansen in Silver Spring, Maryland.⁴² At the birthday celebrations, it was said: "the loving concern and interest Pastor Read had always shown for his workers. He has demonstrated this concern by personal involvement in their problems, by assistance in time of need, and a buoyant faith and optimism in time of discouragement. His life has touched many areas of denominational service."⁴³ Read's response to the tributes was the following: "Pastor Read, in responding to the tributes of his friends, told them that a man's position was not important, but rather what God thinks of the man."⁴⁴ Pastor C. D. Watson then presented Read with a birthday gift in the form of a book of biblical textual criticism. Inscribed inside the book were the names of those present at the birthday celebrations.

On Friday 27, 1976, at the age of 92, Read died at the Washington Adventist Hospital.⁴⁵ The funeral service took place on March 4 at the Takoma Park Church, where he had been a long-standing member.⁴⁶

Read's legacy was a life of dedication and passion for the church and its evangelistic work.

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