

# Laurence, Joseph H. (1885–1987)

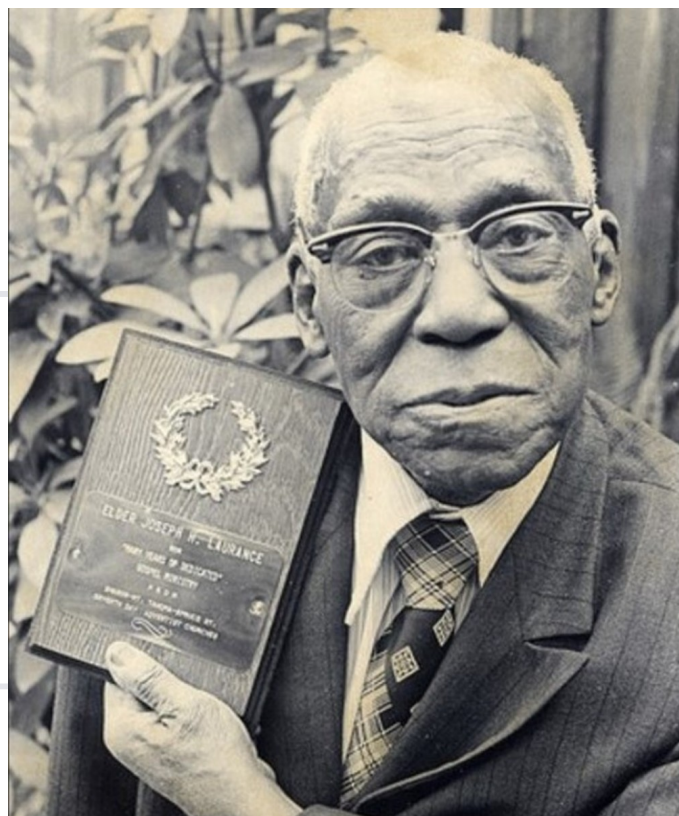
GLENN O. PHILLIPS

Glenn O. Phillips, Ph.D. (Howard University, Washington, D.C.), although retired, is actively writing, researching, lecturing, and publishing. He was a professor at Morgan State University, Howard University, and the University of the Southern Caribbean. He has authored and published numerous articles, book reviews, and books, including "The African Diaspora Experience," "Singing in a Strange Land: The History of the Hanson Place Church," "African American Leaders of Maryland," and "The Caribbean Basin Initiative."

Joseph Hermanus Warrington Laurence was a pioneering Caribbean evangelist who worked primarily across the American South. He attended Oakwood Training School, where in 1904 he received an invitation to work in Yazoo City, Mississippi, with a quickly expanding outreach program. The program was started by Elder James Edson White on the riverboat *The Morning Star* which was operated by Elder F. R. Rogers.<sup>1</sup>

Over the decades, Laurence became one of the most successful early Adventist evangelists across the southern states where Jim Crow practices prevailed. He preached in areas that had never witnessed Seventh-day Adventist evangelists and for the next 60 years continued on as lecturer, pastor, church builder, and leading supporter of Christian Adventist education. He baptized hundreds of youth, purchased and/or built dozens of churches, and continued to serve after his retirement until his death at the age of 102.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph H. W. Laurence was born January 8, 1885, to Joseph Daniel and Mary Magdalene Laurence in Basseterre, St. Kitts, in the British West Indies. He attended the Basseterre Moravian Primary School and, on completion, began teaching at the Basseterre Anglican Primary School. When he was eight years old, he learned about Seventh-day Adventists and at 11 years old pledged to join the faith, but his family objected. At age 15 he again decided to be baptized, but his mother hid the clothes that he planned to wear to the event. Some months later, in May 1900, he was successfully baptized by Elder A. J. Haysmer.<sup>3</sup> His family and many people in the community expressed very strong disapproval of his decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist. However, he was encouraged by Haysmer to continue his education by attending a Seventh-day Adventist school in the United



Joseph H. Laurence.

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

States—Oakwood Training School (now Oakwood University) in Huntsville, Alabama.

On March 25, 1903, on his way to the school in Alabama, Laurence arrived in New York City and stayed briefly in Brooklyn with Elder S. N. Haskell who was president of the International Tract Society. “The next day, Mrs. Haskell prepared him a big lunch and gave him two dollars and sent him on his journey to Oakwood.<sup>4</sup> Without adequate funds to pay for his board and tuition, Laurence worked teaching other students. He also received funds from the Dorcas Society of Grand Junction, Colorado, and other missionary minded Adventist groups. In 1904, while at Oakwood Training School, according to one author, he witnessed Ellen G. White’s speech to the students about preparing themselves to serve in the African-American communities across the American South.<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 1904, Laurence was invited by Elder F. R. Rogers who worked in Yazoo City, Mississippi, to assist in the work of the Southern Missionary Society. The society was directed by Elder James Edson White on the well-known house boat *The Morning Star*, managed by Elders White and Rogers. After his initial and short tenure at Yazoo City, Mississippi, he returned to Oakwood Training School and married Bela Brandon, a daughter of the prominent Brandon family who lived near Huntsville. He then returned to Mississippi.

During the following 50 years, Laurence became one of the most successful soul-winning evangelists serving the Seventh-day Adventist Church, mostly in the southern and midwestern states between 1906 and 1956. Among his early mentors was Elder Sydney Scott with whom he frequently worked in Mississippi and Alabama. Those years were very difficult for Laurence and his wife, especially since his financial upkeep depended on the meager financial contributions from church members in the northern United States. However, he was afforded an evangelistic assistant, George E. Peters—who went on to launch an outstanding evangelistic and pastoral career of his own. Unfortunately, during Laurence’s large evangelistic crusade in Mobile, Alabama, his wife, Bela, fell ill from a lack of proper healthcare and died suddenly. Nevertheless, Laurence continued preaching and conducting very successful evangelistic campaigns in the years to come. Laurence eventually married the former Geneva Wilson, and to this union came six children: Hermanus, Genevieve, Joycelyn, Dorothea, Mae, and Carty.<sup>6</sup>

By 1910 Laurence was ordained as a pastor. One of the most interesting features of his very appealing evangelistic crusades and powerful preaching was the conversion of individuals who would become prominent leaders within the Church. Among them were Milton M. Young of Memphis, Tennessee; Leslie J. Prior of Louisville, Kentucky; Louis H. Bland of Donaldsonville, Louisiana; Frank L. Peterson of Pensacola, Florida; and Fletcher J. Bryant, a former Methodist minister. Laurence was also instrumental in the conversion of a number of families from whom emerged some well-known African American evangelists.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, his ministry was responsible for establishing many of the first set of racially integrated Adventist congregations in the deep south during a time when it was not encouraged.

In the mid-1940s when the Church established the regional conferences, Elder Laurence became one of the most vocal critics. He frequently stated that the action was a continuation of a North American church-wide segregationist policy. For this view, he was transferred from his Ohio congregation to an integrated

congregation in the northwest. Nevertheless, his ministry and effectiveness in soul winning continued until his official retirement and many years beyond.

Having inspired and baptized hundreds of believers, Laurence passed to his rest on September 4, 1987, surrounded by his wife and family.<sup>8</sup> In the sunset of his years, he was cared for by his daughter, Genevieve Richards. During the final year of his life, he was featured in the September 1987 *North American Regional Voice* with a life sketch by James E. Dykes, entitled "Pioneer Evangelist ... Celebrates 103<sup>d</sup> Birthday!

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## SOURCES

Dudley, Sr., Charles Edward. *Thou Who Hast Brought Us Thus Far on Our Way: The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination Among African Americans*. Nashville, TN: Dudley Publications, 1999.

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Reynolds, Louis B. *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of American Seventh-day Adventists with an African Heritage*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984.

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## NOTES

1. James E. Dykes, "J. H. Laurence: Man of God," *North American Regional Voice*, September 1987, 2-3; Ronald D. Graybill, *Mission to Black America*, (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1971), 127.
2. Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of American Seventh-day Adventists with an African Heritage* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), 134.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Charles Edward Dudley, Sr., *Thou Who Hast Brought Us Thus Far on Our Way: The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination Among African Americans* (Nashville, TN: Dudley Publications, 1999), 323, 331.
6. Dykes, 2-3.
7. Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony* (Toledo, OH: Jet Printing Service, 1975), 152.

8. *North American Regional Voice*, October 1987.

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