Johnson, Lewis  
(1851–1940)

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Brian E. Strayer, Ph.D. (University of Iowa). Strayer taught history at Jackson (MI) Junior Academy, the University of Iowa, Southern Adventist University, and Andrews University for 41 years. He has written 10 books, 120 scholarly and professional articles, 40 reviews and critiques in French and Adventist history and directed three Adventist heritage tours of New England. He writes a weekly column (“The Past Is Always Present”) in the Journal Era and shares Adventist history at camp meetings, schools, and churches.

Lewis Johnson, preacher, evangelist, and conference president, was born on June 6, 1851, in Nyborre, on the Island of Moen, in Denmark. He immigrated to the United States in 1869 and settled in Boone County, Iowa. In 1873 at twenty-two he joined the Methodist Church and the following year, he received a license to preach.

On June 6, 1875, Johnson married Christine Henriksen, and the couple had five daughters. After attending a series of meetings led by evangelist J. F. Hanson, the Johnsons became Seventh-day Adventists in August 1875, and Lewis was elected a local church elder. One year later at the camp meeting in Marshalltown, Iowa, the Conference granted him a license to preach. Within months he had raised up the West Dayton, Iowa, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In 1876 and 1877, Johnson labored primarily among Scandinavian immigrants in Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota. In 1878 and 1879, he worked in Illinois, particularly in the Chicago area. At the Bloomington, Illinois camp meeting in August 1878, he was ordained to the gospel ministry by George I. Butler (1834-1918). Johnson’s tent evangelism proved very successful in baptizing new members and establishing churches across the Midwest and Central states. In 1880 the Johnsons were transferred to Minnesota. Later that summer at Mankota, Minnesota, Lewis Johnson and Rufus A. Underwood (1850-1932) led the first known children’s Sabbath school meetings to be held at an Adventist camp meeting.

On January 1, 1889, the Johnsons left the United States for Christiana (now Oslo), Norway, where Johnson was to replace Ole Andres Olson (1845-1915) who was elected as the General Conference president (1888-1897). Between 1889 and 1899, while Johnson was serving as president of the Nordic Union, he simultaneously filled the positions of president of the Norwegian Conference (for ten years), president of the Swedish Conference (for seven years), and president of the Danish Conference (for nine years). During his tenure, Johnson baptized the first converts in Lapland, and Adventist growth across Scandinavia more than doubled, from 900 to 2,100 members. In 1895 Ellen White (1827-1915), then in Australia, wrote him a letter encouraging him to be faithful in returning his tithes and offerings despite his meager income.

In September 1899 the Johnsons returned to the United States and bought a home near Union College in College View (southeast of Lincoln), Nebraska. For the next eight years (1899-1907), Johnson directed the work among the Danish-Norwegian immigrants in the states of mid-America. In March 1907 the Johnsons moved to Seattle, Washington. After successful tent meetings in Ballard, Washington, Johnson established an Adventist church there and became its first pastor. Between 1912 and 1916 Johnson served as the president of the Washington Conference. In May 1915 Christine Johnson, his wife of forty years, died. Two years later Johnson married Magda Madsen, and they had one daughter whose name is unknown.

In 1916 at age 65, Johnson retired as Washington Conference president. However, he continued serving as a local church pastor wherever he was needed for the next eleven years. In 1920 the General Conference sent him on an
eight-month tour to compile reports on Adventist institutions in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Although Johnson retired from pastoral ministry in 1927 at age 76, he continued accepting invitations to preach in local congregations and at camp meetings well into his eighties. He preached his last sermon at eighty-eight in January 1940. Lewis Johnson died on February 10, 1940, in Seattle, Washington, at age 88. L. H. Christian (1871-1949), a general vice-president of the General Conference, who like Johnson was born in Denmark and had begun his ministerial career working among Scandinavians in the Midwest, preached the funeral sermon. Johnson’s body was buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Seattle, Washington.

Lewis Johnson served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an evangelist working among Scandinavian immigrants in the mid-American states (1875-1889, 1899-1907), as president of the Nordic Union (1889-1899), and later as president of the Washington Conference (1912-1916). During his retirement years (1927-1940), he also served effectively as a preacher in the Washington Conference.

**SOURCES**


“Lewis Johnson.” 1940.


Note