

Pearson, Walter Leonard, Jr. (1945–2020)

R. CLIFFORD JONES

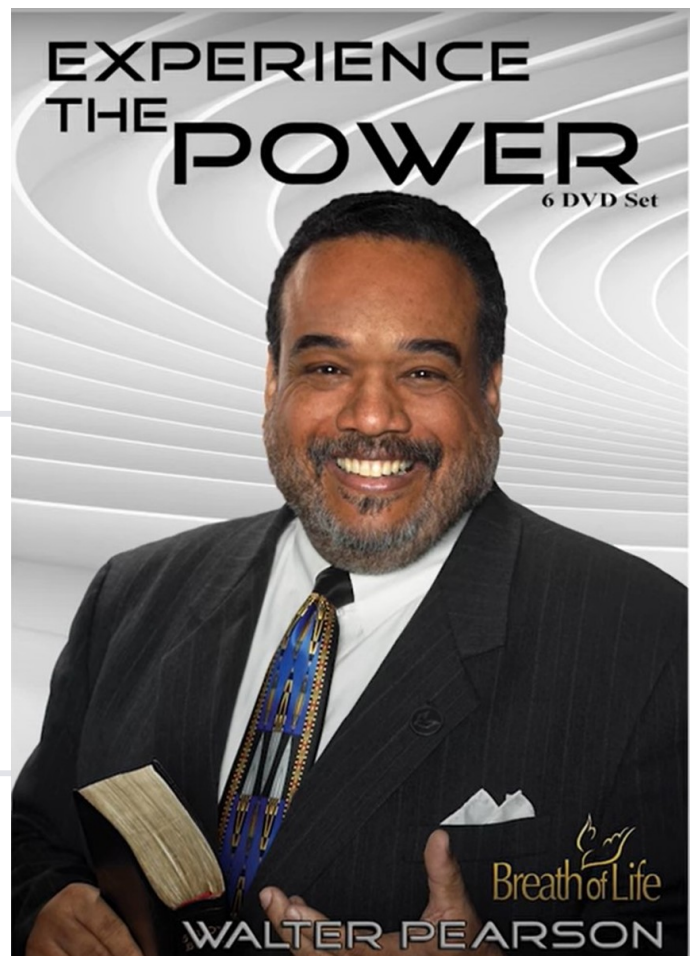
R. Clifford Jones is the dean of the School of Theology at Oakwood University. Before joining the Oakwood team, he was the president of the Lake Region Conference and associate dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. The mentor of a host of pastors, Jones earned terminal degrees from New York Theological Seminary (D.Min.) and Western Michigan University (Ph.D.), and pastored in the Northeastern Conference before transitioning to academic administration.

Walter Leonard Pearson, Jr. was an African-American pastor, media evangelist, and denominational administrator, and the first Seventh-day Adventist preacher to be inducted into the Martin Luther King, Jr. Board of Preachers and Collegium of Scholars at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

Early Life

Walter Leonard Pearson, Jr. was born on November 18, 1945, in Mobile, Mobile County, Alabama.¹ His father, Walter Leonard Pearson, Sr., was a general contractor, and his mother, Bernice Pearson (nee Davis), was a church school teacher and principal. Walter had one brother, Edward Luther, who was 18 months his junior. Their hard-working father's constant search for work because of racial tensions in the south took the family from Mobile to Birmingham, Alabama, and then to Yazoo City and Greenville in Mississippi before the family finally settled in Savannah, Georgia. In Savannah, Walter L. Pearson, Sr. worked part-time as a colporteur to augment what he earned as a general contractor.

The Pearsons believed in Christian education and worked hard to send their two sons to private Christian schools. Walter attended public elementary school in Savannah before, at 14 years of age, enrolling in Adventist-owned and operated Pine Forge Academy in Pine Forge, Pennsylvania. It was at Pine Forge that Pearson's preaching abilities were discovered and first nurtured. Pine Forge Academy also caused Pearson to see the



Walter L. Pearson, Jr., speaker-director (1998-2009).

From Breath of Life TV.

world differently. Not only was he interacting for the first time with other black youth from across the United States, but he was also interfacing with black youth from foreign countries. For a while, Pearson had a West African roommate.

At Pine Forge Academy, Pearson was elected president of his sophomore, junior, and senior classes. He was also elected president of the student association, which was organized while he was there.²

College Education and Marriage

Upon graduating from Pine Forge, Pearson matriculated at Oakwood College (now Oakwood University) in Huntsville, Alabama, to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree in religion and theology. Oakwood, the only historically black Seventh-day Adventist educational institution in the United States, was the natural choice for Pearson, who was born in Alabama. Pearson was at Oakwood during the turbulent 1960s, a decade of racial tension and unrest in the United States. It was also a decade of change at Oakwood, with students studying theology in preparation for ministry changing the way they carried themselves on campus, dressing more casually.³

Pearson's leadership skills were recognized at Oakwood College, where he was elected president of his freshman class on the strength of the Pine Forge contingent of students who were at Oakwood. He was also elected president of the United Student Movement. Before serving as president of the United Student Movement, Pearson served as its parliamentarian and general vice president. Dr. Frank Hale, the institution's president while Pearson was enrolled at Oakwood, believed that Pearson was "a young man divinely endowed and superbly equipped with talents that would carry him far." Hale stated: "One could predict his future because of his eagerness, his sense of purpose, his ability to articulate goals and because of his dynamic personality that was always bubbling over with a sense of enthusiasm."⁴ Unfortunately, Pearson's grade point average (GPA) suffered as a result of his student leadership engagement and activism.⁵

Like most students at Oakwood College at the time, Pearson sold magazines in the summer to be able to get through school. He was good at selling magazines in part because of his gregarious personality. He had a robust sense of humor and was skilled at imitating people, especially the outstanding African-American Seventh-day Adventist preachers of the era. Pearson often teamed up with Clifton Davis, who went on to become a famous television personality, to impersonate people. Pearson and Davis were actors/performers of sorts on the Oakwood College campus. Their skill in capturing and captivating an audience long remembered.

Pearson was also skilled at sketching and drawing, though he did not do much painting. Sketching and drawing were natural attributes that Pearson did not have to develop, and there were some who believed that he had a future as an artist. However, Pearson had already decided to become a preacher.⁶

Labeled an activist by his detractors, Pearson withdrew from Oakwood a few credit hours short of the required number for his bachelor's degree. He would later complete all requirements for the degree, in part due to the

help of Dr. Mervyn Warren, an academic mentor of sorts who held many academic leadership positions at Oakwood, including acting president.⁷ Later, Pearson did graduate studies at the University of Kentucky and Georgia State University.

Walter Leonard Pearson, Jr. was married for four decades to Sandra L. Holland, whom he met at Oakwood College. The couple married in 1967 and were blessed with two children, Ericca and Walter III. Pearson and his wife partnered in soul winning, and Sandra's untimely passing in 2009 was a blow to his ministry. In 2011, Pearson married Patricia Patterson, an educational administrator. Patricia ministered emotionally and spiritually to Walter until he passed to his rest in 2020.

Ministerial Service

Pearson's ministerial career launched in 1969 when he accepted a call to be the associate pastor of the Glenville Seventh-day Adventist church in Cleveland, Ohio. The church was a member congregation of the Allegheny West Conference (AWC), whose president, Harold Cleveland, was one of Pearson's mentors. Other mentors included Edward Earl Cleveland, Charles Bradford, Samuel Myers, and Charles D. Brooks, all outstanding African-American leaders and preachers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ordained in 1971 at the Allegheny West Conference Camp Meeting, Pearson had a passion for youth and from 1976 to 1978 was the youth director of the AWC. He distinguished himself in that role through the leadership training that he planned and executed for youth, as well as the Youth Federation program that he was instrumental in spearheading. He also served as director of urban ministries for the AWC, and was voted "Pastor of the Year" by his peers on three occasions in two different local conferences.

Walter Pearson led two of the most recognized congregations in the black work: North Philadelphia in the Allegheny East Conference, and Berean (Atlanta) in the South Atlantic Conference, both of which grew exponentially during his tenure. He served North Philadelphia for five years in the mid-1970s, leading it to become the second largest congregation in the Allegheny East Conference on the strength of his dynamic evangelistic preaching and television ministry. *Daybreak*, a television program of which Pearson was executive director and speaker, contributed to his growth and prepared him to become a media evangelist of renown.

In 1985 Pearson moved south to pastor the prestigious Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, serving there for approximately eight years. While pastoring this church, Pearson served on the executive board of Mayor Maynard Jackson's "Atlanta Religious Mobilization Against Crime" and was a chaplain for two law enforcement agencies. Pearson was known for cultivating professional and personal relationships with non-Adventist religious leaders. He offered the benediction at Ebenezer Baptist Church for the first national celebration of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday in 1986, and his performance was replayed several times on local and national television.

Pearson transitioned from parish ministry to denominational leadership when he joined the Ellen G. White Estate of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists as an associate secretary in 1993. He was the first African-American to serve in that role. Later, he served as an associate director of Evangelism and Church Growth in the Ministerial Department of the General Conference. When Charles D. Brooks retired from the *Breath of Life* telecast, Walter Pearson, Jr. was invited to replace him, becoming the second speaker/director of the unique evangelistic tool envisioned by Walter Arties and supported by the regional conferences of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Pearson served as a general field secretary of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists while being speaker/director of *Breath of Life*.

As speaker/director of *Breath of Life*, Walter Pearson was a media evangelist known around the world, and as the only African-American Seventh-Day Adventist media evangelist in America, his influence and impact on the African-American community were powerful. His name was a household word in Adventist circles worldwide.

Later Life

In 1988 a health issue that kept Pearson out of the pulpit for six weeks caused him to reflect deeply on his future as an Adventist pastor and preacher. He surmised after intense introspection that a law degree would maximize his options and impact on the African-American community and his usefulness to God. His brother-in-law, an alumnus of Howard University School of Law, encouraged Pearson to apply there. Pearson did so, believing that Howard had a unique reputation “in the world community of scholars and specifically its standing among intellectuals whose responsibility it is to deal with the struggle for freedom.”⁸ Yet, for unknown reasons, Pearson never pursued a legal education.

Pearson retired from active service in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2016, having preached the gospel on six continents and in sixty-seven countries, including Jamaica, Ghana, Poland, Kenya, Denmark, Australia, and England. When he retired, he was pastoring the Beacon Light Seventh-day Adventist Church in Annapolis, Maryland. Pearson has been credited with bringing approximately 25,000 people into the Seventh-day Adventist Church through baptism, including 5,000 in one day during NET2004, a satellite initiative of the North American Division called “Experience the Power.”⁹

The survivor of a stroke in 2006, Pearson lost his first wife in 2009. When he passed to his rest on June 7, 2020, he left to mourn his passing his second wife Patricia, whom he married in 2011; three adult children, Ericca, Walter III, and Mia-Liani; several grandsons, one granddaughter, his brother Edward Luther Pearson, a brother-in-law, and a host of other relatives. His obituaries appeared in the North American Division electronic newsletter and the *Southern Tidings*, the magazine of the Southern Union.¹⁰

Pearson the Preacher

Walter Leonard Pearson, Jr. was a preacher of rare skill who believed that God reaches people through the foolishness of preaching. He preached his first sermon at the age of 11 but did not decide to become a preacher until years later when he preached at a prison and several prisoners gave their hearts to Jesus. Known for his story-telling ability, Pearson credited his mother, a school teacher, as the source of that skill. Pearson's mother was headed to Howard University when she and her mother heard the powerful preaching of J. G. Thomas under a tent in Mobile, Alabama. She gave her heart to Jesus and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is unclear as to when and how Pearson himself became a baptized member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What is inarguably clear is that Pearson was a devout Seventh-day Adventist from his teenage years onward, and he passed to his rest in the Blessed Hope.

As for his humor, Pearson believed that it was a natural gift that he used to God's glory, though he did not consider himself witty or an outstanding preacher. Often, the laughter of his audiences caught him by surprise. Pearson was skilled in the art of the sermon appeal, which he believed should always be ethical. His goal as an evangelist was to get people to experience and fall in love with Jesus. He was unapologetic about African-American preaching, believing that African-American and Seventh-day Adventist preaching are both biblical and address the whole person.¹¹

Contribution/Legacy

In 1991, Pearson became the first Seventh-day Adventist to be inducted into the Board of Preachers and Collegium of Scholars at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 2005, Pearson received a "Legacy of the Dreamer Award" from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In all, he received more than one hundred awards from academic, civic, community, and religious organizations, and four honorary doctorates were conferred upon him. Other African-American preachers inducted into Morehouse's prestigious Collegium of Scholars on the recommendation of Walter Pearson include Dr. Mervyn Warren, who served at Oakwood College and Oakwood University in several administrative roles, and Dr. Carlton Byrd, who has the distinction of following Pearson as pastor of historic Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and as speaker/director of the *Breath of Life* telecast.

Pearson was a preacher whose outlook on mission and ministry was not intimidated by evangelism.¹² He believed that success in evangelism did not depend upon extraordinary talent but on the Holy Spirit, and he was resilient and hopeful about the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church throughout his career.¹³ For Pearson, preaching constituted the center of ministry, and he believed it is a thrill to be used by God. His legacy includes his wit and winsome smile, and pastors whom he mentored. Carlton "Buddy" Byrd, who succeeded Pearson as speaker/director of *Breath of Life*, remembers being mesmerized by Pearson as a boy at a South Atlantic Conference Camp Meeting in the early 1980s. Pearson remained one of Byrd's favorite preachers until Pearson passed to his rest, and Byrd believes that Pearson's "Experience the Power" campaign and preaching

prowess are among Pearson's greatest legacies and contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁴

Pearson's preaching style was distinctive. He was an excellent story-teller. Bible characters formed the basis of his preaching. Using inductive more than deductive reasoning, he was adept at spinning material into personalities. This is not to say that his preaching was shallow or lacked theology; rather, he excelled in establishing narrative preaching, making it attractive and appealing.¹⁵ Pearson found a way to preach even distinctive Seventh-day Adventist doctrines like the Sabbath and the state of the dead from a narrative standpoint.¹⁶

Pearson's creativity is evident in his sermon on the well-known passage describing God's admonition to the prophet Ezekiel to prophesy to a valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Entitled "Called to the Dry Bones District," the sermon was preached to a group of theology student and pastors, and Pearson's objective was to challenge them to be faithful in preaching to audiences often comprised of disinterested hearers. Pearson stressed that seemingly hopeless situations are the very places where God's power is manifested, and he ended the sermon by sharing an incident involving his mother and one of her students in whom she instilled hope.¹⁷

Pearson ranks among the most dynamic preachers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A scholar and preacher, Pearson knew how to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), and his preaching and ministry transcended the African-American community. He served the Church with integrity and ingenuity, leaving a legacy that will stand the test of time. As the second speaker/director of *Breath of Life*, the pioneer media ministry aimed at the African-American community, his service brought increased clarity about regional conferences, the unique organizational arrangement in the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists that has facilitated mission and ministry among people of color since their establishment in the mid-twentieth century.

SOURCES

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2. Walter L. Pearson, Jr., Personal Statement, unpublished manuscript in the author's possession.
3. Ibid.
4. Frank W. Hale, Jr., *Angels Watching Over Me: The Autobiography of Dr. Frank W. Hale, Jr.*, (Nashville, TN: James C. Winston Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 220.
5. Walter L. Pearson, Jr., Personal Statement.
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