



Les Coombe as a young colporteur

Photo courtesy of Les Devine.

Coombe, Leslie Charles (1914–2012)

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Pastor L. C. Coombe, of British heritage, was a career-length pastor for the Seventh-day Adventist Church who, during his long years of service, ministered in each and every state in mainland Australia, with many of those years as a youth leader or in other departmental roles at Conference, Union, and (now defined as) the Division level of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church including being a Conference president. However, he had the heart of a pastor, and after he retired, he continued to serve in that role as a volunteer for some years and in several locations.

Early Years

Leslie (Les) Coombe was born in Brunswick, a city in the State of Victoria in Australia, on May 3, 1914, as the second-last child of 56-years-old blacksmith John Henry Coombe and his wife of 41 years, Emily Sophia Coombe. Their youngest son had 10 siblings, eight of them from his father's first marriage.^{1,2}

In 1917, Leslie was "miraculously healed" of Meningitis³ In 1920, the family moved to Croydon, a suburb of the city of Melbourne. Les attended primary/elementary school there and later obtained his secondary education at Swinbourne College.

Youth

Apprenticed to the printing trade, Les took further post-secondary training related to that occupation, obtaining several certificates⁴ along the way, completed his apprenticeship⁵ and worked for a Mr. Bussau⁶ in the trade until he left to attend Avondale College in 1936.

Les Coombe was a ministerial student at Avondale College (now Avondale University College) from 1936 through the end of 1939.⁷ Very likely the most momentous event for him during these years was the revival at Avondale as a consequence of the Week of Prayer conducted in 1939 by Pastor Len Minchin, the youth leader of the (now named) South Pacific Division.⁸

Revival swept through the college, students and faculty alike. Prayer groups met all over the campus, with one session lasting all night. Tensions between people were made right, and testimony meetings lasted for hours. The regular class timetable was abandoned for a time. Following the New Testament model, inappropriate books and music were burned.

What started at Avondale spread all across the Adventist community in Australia and New Zealand by the end of the year. Decades later, senior pastors⁹ would talk with great fondness of that life-changing revival series, which had since colored their lives and shaped their ministry. Les Coombe was a senior ministerial student at Avondale and the prayer fellowship coordinator for the campus.¹⁰ He later wrote, "That year was not only outstanding in the history of the College but also throughout the Australasian Union Conference (presently South Pacific Division). It is perhaps the greatest out-pouring of the Spirit in the Church since the beginning of our work in

Australia.”¹¹ Wrote another, “Hundreds of people would remember that year as a veritable 20th century Pentecost.”¹²

Church Work

Upon graduation in 1939,¹³ Les Coombe entered the literature evangelism work of the Church for the next two years.¹⁴ It should be here noted that, for many years, the Adventist Church in the South Pacific required at least one year in literature evangelism for ministerial graduates. Rather than do that following graduation, it later became more common for ministerial students to complete this requirement during their summer vacations.¹⁵ The early literature evangelism experience for Les Coombe was faith-affirming. Leaving his home in Croydon, a suburb of Melbourne, he cycled 27 kilometers to Greensborough, and at 3 p.m. that afternoon, he prayed as he began looking for accommodation. Then he clearly heard a voice telling him, “Not Greensborough, Epping,” another town 13 kilometers further away. Another long cycle ride was not attractive; then he received the same message again; so, recognizing God was speaking to him, he rode to Epping. When he arrived, he found no accommodation available, so he prayed again and made one final attempt to find lodging. Knocking on the door a young lad had directed him to, he met Mr. Shallard who told him that at 3 p.m. that afternoon he had been praying God would send someone to help him and he said, “God has answered my prayer!” Les Coombe was encouraged by this experience and knew God would continue to help him in the book-selling work as he listened and obeyed God’s instruction.¹⁶

During those first two years of denominational service in the Australian state of Victoria, Les Coombe also worked with Pastor David Sibley in the Advent Radio Church. He took up his first ministerial posting in 1942, also in Victoria, and continued there until the end of 1943.¹⁷

Wedding Bells

While at Avondale, Les had become acquainted with Elma Blair, who had completed her teacher training there and also graduated in 1939. After teaching for two years in Christchurch, New Zealand, Elma was posted to teach at the Remuera School in Auckland, New Zealand. Separated by wartime travel restrictions and distance, the young couple made plans by correspondence to marry. But Les could not leave Australia during these wartime restrictions, and Elma had the same problem in New Zealand. Les Coombe had to make a statutory declaration¹ regarding the genuineness of the engagement, and Elma Blair had to also follow an extensive procedure of interviews and be examined similarly. Once Elma Blair was given a “B1 priority” for travel to Australia, the date for the wedding was set for February 8, 1943, at 6:30 p.m., and plans were put in place and invitations sent out accordingly.

But how would the bride get there? Ships across the Tasman Sea to Australia were few and far between and had to zigzag to avoid submarines and also watch out for mines. Because of these realities, the trip was longer and slower than in peacetime. Long-distance aviation in those days was by “flying boat.” The trouble was all the flying boats in New Zealand had been grounded for two months with mechanical problems, and only those passengers with the highest priority were permitted to travel by air anyway. Thus, someone like Elma Blair with a “B1” priority had little chance of getting a seat. So, with nothing happening by the beginning of February, Elma Blair sent Les a telegram suggesting that if she could not get to Australia by the next Thursday, it would be necessary to cancel all the wedding arrangements. She’d had an opportunity to travel on the Sabbath, but did not think that appropriate. Even if she got to Sydney, she would still have to get government permission to travel interstate, and then also on arrival in Australia, book a seat on the train. So Elma’s need became a matter of earnest prayer, and she packed her bags in faith. At 6:30 a.m. the next morning (Tuesday), she could hear the sea-planes on the harbor running up their engines getting ready to fly at 7:00 a.m.. So, it seemed she would not fly that day! Then the phone rang. If she could get to the harbor in 30 minutes, there was a seat for her since an army Colonel had just cancelled his trip. After a hurried farewell to her parents, she went on board, and the plane took off immediately. It was a very rough ride at low altitude that took 10 hours, and she was airsick most of the way. Then there was a very welcome telegram she sent to Les telling him she was arriving by train in Melbourne on the Friday morning. She was excited; after three years apart with an ocean between them, they would be together again! The wedding went ahead on February 8, 1943,¹⁸ as scheduled, and their joint journey began--arranged, ordained and blessed by God!⁹

Church Administrative Work

After one year of married life in Melbourne with Pastor Sibley, the young couple found themselves in North Queensland with Les based in Townsville, where he was the Conference youth leader, and he also looked after the Sabbath School and Home Missions Departments. There, their first two children, Raymond and Graham, were born, and on May 10, 1947, Les Coombe was ordained to the gospel ministry.²⁰

Later in 1947, Les Coombe was appointed as the assistant youth leader at the denominational headquarters of the Church in the South Pacific, the Australasian Union Conference (now South Pacific Division).²¹ For two years, Les Coombe worked there with the charismatic American, Pastor A. W. Peterson,²² and Pastor Harold Meyers. Then from 1950–1955, Les served as the youth leader in the South New South Wales Conference along with other departmental responsibilities.²³ This is where daughter Glenda was born.

From 1955-58, Les Coombe was the youth director for the Western Australian Conference before moving to Melbourne as the youth director for the Trans Commonwealth Union Conference of the SDA Church²⁴ until 1966. In that year he was elected the president of the South Australian Conference of the SDA Church, and he served in that position until 1969, when he pastored several congregations in Western Australia, initially the

Fremantle, Cottesloe, and Mandurah churches. At the end of 1972 he was transferred to Mt Lawley and the Perth city church.²⁵ From 1974-1978, Pastor Coombe managed the large Memorial and Avondale congregations, both on the campus of Avondale College (now Avondale University). During 1979/80, he pastored the Charlestown and Swansea churches in the Newcastle area of North New South Wales.²⁶

Later Years of Life

Supposedly retiring in 1981, Les Coombe then spent six months in Papua, New Guinea, and then from 1982-1985, he pastored the Dora Creek congregation located not far from Avondale College. This was followed by six months in the latter part of 1986 as pastor of the Busselton, Margaret River, and Capel churches in Western Australia. Then in 1990, he moved with Elma into the retirement village in Cooranbong NSW, being among the first residents in the expanding facility then under development there.²⁷

Leslie Charles Coombe went to his rest on August 24, 2012, at 98 years of age.²⁸ His wife Elma (Blair) Coombe lived on, with excellent physical vigor, mental acuity, and enthusiasm for life, celebrating her 100th birthday in 2020.

Leslie Charles Coombe was in full-time ministry for 42 years and then spent more than 25 years in part-time ministry during retirement. While he spent much of his full-time career in leadership positions, at heart he was always a pastor. With the personal motto of "Not I but Christ," he was a caring and positive influence on everyone he met.²⁹

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