

# Palmer, Edwin Rubin (1869–1931)

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## DONALD R. MCADAMS

Donald R. McAdams graduated from Columbia Union College and received a Ph.D. in British history from Duke University. He taught at Andrews University (1967-1975), was president of Southwestern Adventist College (1975-1984), and in the years following served as president of the Texas Independent College Fund, executive president of the American Productivity & Quality Center, president of McAdams, Faillace & Associates, Inc, a productivity management consulting firm, executive vice president of Texas Southern University, research professor at the University of Houston, and 12 years on the Houston school board. As founder and president of the Center for Reform of School Systems (2001-2011), he provided governance training for over 100 urban school boards and wrote four books on urban school governance.

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Edwin Rubin Palmer managed Avondale College, the Paradise Valley Sanitarium, and, for nineteen years, the Review and Herald Publishing Association, but his most significant contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist church was his leadership of the General Conference publishing department during the early years of the twentieth century. During these critical years, when institutional foundations were being formed, he, more than anyone, shaped the denomination's world-wide system of publishing and distributing Adventist literature.

## Early Life (1869-1895)

Edwin Palmer was born into the Adventist home of Reuben Giles and Judith Luella (Ainsworth) Palmer in West Charleston, Vermont, on March 22, 1869.<sup>1</sup> He attended South Lancaster Academy in Massachusetts, dropping out for two years to sell Adventist books door-to-door. Upon his graduation in 1888, the Vermont Conference appointed him state canvassing agent. He also assumed the presidency of the state Sabbath School Association. On June 1, 1893, Palmer married Eva Adell Maynard, born of American parents in Quebec, who subsequently



Edwin R. Palmer next to six-foot high stack of books by Ellen G. White, June 11, 1928.

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

bore him two sons and two daughters.

The next year the Palmers west to Oklahoma, which had been opened to white settlement only five years before, where he served as secretary-treasurer of the new Oklahoma Conference, as well as secretary-treasurer of the Oklahoma Tract and Missionary Society and state canvassing agent. His leadership attracted so much attention that before one year had passed church leaders asked him to take charge of the canvassing work in Australia. On April 6, 1895, the Palmers sailed for the South Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

## Formative Years in Australia (1895-1901)

In Australia, Palmer met Ellen G. White and formed close friendships with her son, W. C. White, and with A. G. Daniells, president of the Australasian Union Conference. These two men, his elders by fifteen and eleven years respectively, became his comrades in implementing a reorganization of the publishing work in Australia. These principles of organization became the model that Palmer struggled to institute on his return to America in 1901.

The problems in Australia were complex. The first Adventist missionaries to Australia, a team of five men and families led by Stephen N. Haskell in 1885, included a canvasser and a printer. When Adventists, in 1888, organized a conference in Australia they also organized a tract and missionary society. Tract and missionary societies, first formed in 1870, encouraged church members to distribute tracts and sell subscriptions to church periodicals. That same year the Echo Publishing Company opened in Melbourne, Australia.

At first the publishing house employed its own canvassing agents and sold retail, but as the work grew it could not adequately supervise canvassers or efficiently supply small orders. Meanwhile, the tract societies in New South Wales and New Zealand were ordering books directly from the Pacific Press in California. Given shipping time, the tract societies had to maintain large inventories, leading to unsold books. By 1894, some of the tract societies were in serious financial difficulty.

The solution was an agreement in 1894 that tract societies would have a monopoly for all retail book business in their districts and in return order all books from the Echo Publishing Company. It was Palmer's job as the first general canvassing agent for the Australasian Union to make the new policy work. Though the Echo Publishing Company management vigorously opposed the plan, Palmer had the full support of Daniells, W. C. White, and Ellen White. By 1900, the union, with a membership of only 2,000, was supporting up to seventy canvassers with \$61,000 in sales.<sup>3</sup>

Palmer thrived as canvassing agent and enjoyed his two years as book and periodical department manager for the Echo Publishing Company. However, he was not yet ready for executive leadership. His year as principal of the school in Avondale, 1899, was stressful. As he wrote later to W. C. White: "I was thrust into a position which called for much more experience and ability than I possessed..."<sup>4</sup> He was glad to return to the Echo Publishing Company where a strong manager carried the responsibility and he was free to push the details. Young Palmer

was an idea man and a promoter, a man who flourished with a special assignment.

## Publishing Challenges in America (1901-1903)

Just such a man was needed in America, for the denomination's publishing efforts in its homeland were in trouble. One major challenge was a stagnating canvassing work. In 1891, literature sales had stood at \$819,000. A general canvassing agent based in Battle Creek, Michigan, oversaw agents in each of the church's six districts—East, South, Midwest, Northern Great Plains, Great Plains and Southwest, and West—and each conference had a state agent and a tract society. In 1893, with a nationwide depression, book sales plummeted, districts and conferences laid off their agents, many state tract societies practically ceased to operate, and publishing houses frequently dealt directly with canvassers. Literature sales fell to \$250,000 in 1895 and remained flat through the end of the century. The new General Conference president in 1901, A. G. Daniells, needed a leader to revitalize the book work. His choice was his lieutenant from Australia, E. R. Palmer<sup>5</sup>

The Palmers settled at church headquarters in Battle Creek and, by October 1901, Palmer was working to revitalize the canvassing work in the Lake Union (unions replaced districts in the church reorganization of April 1901). His official title was secretary to the new publications committee of the General Conference. The chairman was W. C. White, who had also returned to America. But Palmer was the active, full-time, moving force. And his job was not easy.

The main reason for the low book sales in America, in Palmer's opinion, was the decline of strong conference tract societies. Spiritual work had become commercialized as the conferences allowed the publishing houses to manage literature distribution. Palmer's view, explained in a long letter to John Harvey Kellogg, January 27, 1902, with a copy to C. H. Jones, manager of the Pacific Press, was that the publishing houses should be the servants of the message, printing the books needed for evangelism, rather than the church organization being used to meet the financial needs of the publishing houses.<sup>6</sup>

Palmer's copy of this letter to Jones is easily explained: the Pacific Press had requested that it be allowed to manage directly the canvassing work in the Pacific Union. On February 7, Jones replied to Palmer, with a copy of his letter to W. C. White, who, always anxious to cut out middlemen, supported Jones's approach. Jones's argument was simple. If the conferences and tract societies would push literature sales, the Pacific Press would cooperate heartily. But they were not doing so. They were loaded down with health institutions, food companies, educational work, and other matters. "When it comes to the Book work, that is, I was going to say a secondary consideration, but it is much farther [sic] down the list than that; say fourth or fifth...." In the Pacific Union, with 10,000 Adventists and a population as big as Australia, only \$20,000 worth of books had been sold in the past two years. Jones was immovable.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the burdens of the publications committee, in May 1903 Palmer accepted responsibility for the circulation department of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, the church's premier publishing house. He also became, in effect, a decision-maker at the General Conference. On May 18, 1903, he wrote to W. C. White that since Daniells and W. A. Spicer, the General Conference secretary, would be away often during the summer, he would take care of the routine office work. At one point, to help Spicer during a difficult time, he responded to sixty-five Spicer correspondents within a few days.<sup>8</sup> As Palmer stated later in a letter to White: "the ease with which I use stenographic help enables me to turn over quite a volume of business."<sup>9</sup>

## Tragedy and Recovery in Southern California (1903-1904)

The complex question of how the canvassing work was to be managed in America was not settled quickly. Palmer would have to confront it again. But, in 1903 a family tragedy and failing health led to a break in Palmer's involvement in that struggle. On March 2, Palmer's wife Eva died.<sup>10</sup> The death of his wife and his policy disagreements with W. C. White, Jones, and others pushed Palmer to the brink of depression.<sup>11</sup>

Then, on May 21 he received a five-page letter from Ellen White. She praised him for the gift the Lord had given him as a canvasser and teacher of others, but informed him that he was not to become discouraged when others did not share his views. "The Lord has not given you the responsibility of governing the work..."<sup>12</sup> Palmer responded to W. C. White on May 27 expressing gratitude for the letters from his mother and her wonderful counsel, which he loved and accepted.<sup>13</sup>

Palmer's spirits improved, and by the early June he was carrying more than his usual amount of work. But, about the middle of July he developed a bronchial infection, and by mid-October he could no longer work. Reluctantly, he resigned his job as circulation manager for the Review and, taking his physician's advice, left for the Arizona Sanitarium, an Adventist institution in Phoenix.<sup>14</sup> Though the infection spread to his left lung, he found the strength on December 31, 1903, to marry Mrs. Cora E. Hutchins, pioneer missionary to the Bay Islands of Honduras and widow of Frank J. Hutchins.<sup>15</sup>

Gradually improving, Palmer sought work, and in February 1904 he moved his family to National City, California, to become the first business manager of the Paradise Valley Sanitarium. He was pleased to be doing something useful for the church while convalescing in sunny Southern California.<sup>16</sup>

## Frustration and Triumph in Mountain View (1904-1907)

After one year at the sanitarium, though still suffering pain in his left lung, Palmer felt well enough to accept a job in Mountain View, California, as an assistant to H. H. Hall in the book and periodical department of the Pacific Press (where Press manager, C. H. Jones, made it clear that the policy of the press dealing directly with canvassers would be followed). As Hall's assistant, Palmer promoted the circulation of periodicals and small

books by church members working door-to-door among their neighbors. He also served as secretary of the Relief Bureau, an organization established to promote the sale of Ellen White's *Ministry of Healing* as a fundraising effort for indebted medical institutions. In addition to these tasks, Palmer, who remained secretary of the publications committee of the General Conference, was responsible for the general publishing work of the church.<sup>17</sup>

These three jobs created considerable frustrations for Palmer. In every job he was the chief promoter of the work, but in none of them could he freely follow his own convictions. Jones and Hall supervised his work at the Pacific Press, and he had serious policy disagreements with W. C. White, who was chairman of both the publications committee and the Relief Bureau. Palmer's frustration came to a head on January 2, 1906. In a fifteen-page single-spaced letter to White, he outlined his vision for the church's publishing work and then offered to resign both from the Relief Bureau and the publications committee. He said he could not continue his work under constant criticism from White, that it was unfortunate that they were entirely at variance on fundamental principles, and that he would leave it to White to decide whether he should continue his work. "The vital question," he stated, "is one of general policy. Shall we centralize power and responsibility in the hands of a few, and thus foster the present weakness of local organizations, or shall we decentralize power and responsibility and strengthen local organizations and the hands of local workers?"<sup>18</sup>

When Palmer wrote this letter the evidence that he was right was already apparent. Sales were down in the conferences that had given up their tract societies and turned their canvassing work over to the Pacific Press. The Pacific Union, the richest union and the best territory for the book business, stood at the bottom in sales. By contrast, the Atlantic Union—where four years before direct connections between canvassers and the publishing house had resulted in only two canvassers in its entire field—was now, under the leadership of strong tract societies, standing first. Furthermore, the Pacific Press was losing more money on books than ever before.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps because of Palmer's threat to resign, but more likely because of book sales and the fire that on July 20, 1906, destroyed the Pacific Press, Palmer's policy soon triumphed. By August, W. C. White was showing an openness to local control and Palmer was suggesting to A. G. Daniells that now was the opportune time to reorganize the publishing work.<sup>20</sup> In a very long letter to union and state conference presidents on February 25, 1907, Palmer, claiming to speak for church leaders, sketched out a grand design for the publishing work that centered around strong tract societies with conference-employed canvassing agents in each state.<sup>21</sup> By summer, the principles of local control had been established everywhere and, with White's departure as chairman of the publications committee, Palmer's dispute with White was brought to an amicable end.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the job frustrations, the years at Mountain View were happy ones for the Palmer family. When early in 1907 Daniells, who had consistently supported Palmer's vision for the publishing work,<sup>23</sup> urged Palmer to come at once to Takoma Park, Maryland, where in 1903 denominational headquarters had been relocated, Palmer hesitated. "We are not overjoyed at the thought of going East," he wrote W. C. White, "for we have enjoyed our

work here very much and have never had a home that we had become so attached to.<sup>24</sup> But the home was sold, and in late June the family departed, traveling in tourist sleepers via New Orleans.

## Organizing the Publishing Work in Takoma Park (1907-1912)

Palmer, now happily settled at church headquarters in Takoma Park, was at last able to organize the publishing work to his principles. At the 1909 General Conference, he reported:

Four years ago there were only a four general agents [for union conferences] in North America, and many conferences were without field agents. Now there are eleven general agents in this territory, and nearly every conference has a field agent.<sup>25</sup>

And sales were booming. Between 1905 and 1910, they increased from \$548,000 to \$1,560,000.<sup>26</sup> The key to further expansion, Palmer said, was local responsibility, local prayers, earnestness, and work. In 1909, the publications committee was reorganized as a department of the General Conference. Palmer, recently ordained to the gospel ministry on April 25, 1908,<sup>27</sup> no longer reported to a chairman, he reported directly to the General Conference committee.

As staff members were added to the publishing department, Palmer took on new duties. He and Daniells were close family friends, too close charged some. There was criticism in 1908 that Daniells was unduly influenced by Palmer. Daniells admitted that Palmer had rough edges and could write a sharp letter, but asserted that the criticism was without merit.<sup>28</sup> On July 1, 1910, the General Conference committee appointed Palmer assistant to the president. In this role he handled much of Daniells's correspondence and advised on general church issues.

## Leadership at the Review (1912-1931)

In 1912, Palmer accepted his last position, the management of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, which had moved east along with the General Conference. He remained as general manager for nineteen years, until his death in 1931. Despite his earlier misgivings about carrying executive responsibilities, Palmer was a superb administrator. His years were marked by the shortages of World War I and the hardships of the Great Depression. Yet, year by year the publishing house showed a substantial profit, and the Review's heavy debt was replaced by a large surplus. At the same time, new additions and new equipment increased the productivity of the house.<sup>29</sup> Palmer had his office located near the machinery, and according to traditions that circulated for decades after his death, his keen ear could detect a change in the hum of machinery. Oil can in hand, he would come out of his office to direct the repair until once again the machines made the right sound.<sup>30</sup>

The spirit and morale of the house was uniformly high during Palmer's years of leadership. The Review employees loved Palmer, who was noted for his ability to secure enthusiastic cooperation from others and handle cases requiring discipline without losing the respect of those involved. His worship talks were a model of

sane and practical advice, and when he spoke in the councils of the General Conference, his voice demanded attention.<sup>31</sup>

## Contribution

Edwin R. Palmer, in declining health for some time, died of pneumonia on February 12, 1931, at the age of 62. Two nights before he died, when the doctors told him that the end was near, he called his family to his bedside and gave each of them a charge and a blessing.<sup>32</sup> The blessing he left to the Adventist Church was an effective, decentralized publishing program, organized to endure. He also left a book, *The Printing Press and the Gospel*, published by the Review in 1912, which inspired generations of canvassers.

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