

Rowe, Thomas Milton (1893–1979)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

Thomas Milton Rowe pastored several large urban churches and, in 1947, became the first president of the Central States Mission (soon thereafter Central States Conference).

He was born in the small town of Lincoln, Alabama, on October 22, 1893, to Thomas Jefferson and Ridley Turner Rowe. When young Thomas was about five years old, the family moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee.¹

Furniture salesman R. R. Hooker introduced the Rowes to the Adventist faith by talking about the Bible on his weekly visits to collect \$1.00 payments on the bedroom set that Mrs. Rowe had purchased. This led to Mr. Hooker giving Bible studies in the home. Though Thomas J. Rowe, a Methodist, initially thought he could teach this Adventist something about the Bible, he found that he was learning new things. At the conclusion of a tent effort that began shortly after the Bible studies, both Mr. and Mrs. Rowe joined the Seventh-day Adventist church.

After losing his job at a foundry for refusing to work on the Sabbath, the senior Rowe moved the family to a small farm where he could provide for them as a Sabbath-keeper. Young Thomas was baptized at thirteen by his father, who had become local elder of the Second Seventh-day Adventist Church in Chattanooga and received authorization from the conference president to perform the baptism.

Thomas met a beautiful young singer, Fannie McBee Maxon, from Chicago, and they were married September 2, 1916. During the summer of 1917, Rowe and his new wife were asked to join in an evangelistic effort conducted



Thomas Milton Rowe

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

by H. N. Gemon in Morristown, Tennessee. "Fannie Mack" (her stage name) was the gospel singer, and Thomas the tent master. At Cumberland Conference camp meeting following the close of the evangelistic meetings, the conference president, J. L. Shuler, urged Rowe to attend Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama, to be trained for ministry. For the next two years, he and Fannie were students at Oakwood and worked in tent meetings during the summers, including an effort led by G. E. Peters in 1918.

Unexpectedly, Fanny died October 30, 1920. For a while, Thomas didn't know what to do. He and his brother, Jesse, were both good musicians who sang and played the Hawaiian harp. Music was a consolation for him until he met Bessie Penn Coleman, also a musician, whom he married March 29, 1923.

In August 1924, Rowe was asked to pastor the Shiloh Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Three years later, Dayton was added to his district. He conducted tent efforts in both cities that led to substantial increase in the membership of both churches. Bessie was his Bible worker, soloist, and choir director. Also, the debt was eliminated on the church buildings by the end of his tenure. While in Cincinnati, Rowe baptized Louis Reynolds and his mother. Reynolds became an outstanding writer and editor of *Message* magazine.

On October 1, 1929, Rowe was called to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he conducted three tent efforts that brought growth to the Ethnan Temple Church. By the end of his six years there, it had become the largest church in the West Pennsylvania Conference with approximately 250 members. In 1935, the East Pennsylvania Conference called Rowe to pastor the South Philadelphia (later, Ebenezer) Church. The church paid off its mortgage and other troublesome debts and increased in membership during his three-and-a-half years there.

Rowe moved to New York on January 1, 1939, to take charge of the 775-member Ephesus Church.² The congregation worshiped in an impressive edifice in Harlem that it had been renting for nine years. In March 1939, shortly after Rowe's arrival, "Father Divine," founder of the controversial Peace Mission religious movement, served notice that he was arranging to purchase the church. Rowe led the congregation in rapidly raising funds and gaining cooperation from the Greater New York, Atlantic Union, and General conferences in financing the purchase.³ By August 1939, they were able to close a deal that gave black Adventists in New York City the first church building they had owned in the thirty-five years of their history in the city. On November 11, 1944, the church was dedicated free of debt by Elder J. L. McElhany, president of the General Conference. By then, membership had grown to 1,134. While serving as pastor of the Ephesus Church, Rowe was also secretary of the black work in the Atlantic Union. His younger brother, Jesse, a professor of music and bass-baritone singer, directed the choirs at Ephesus and was known for his soul-stirring singing. Often the two brothers would sing duets.

In 1945, after six years in New York, Rowe accepted an invitation to serve as an evangelist in the Central Union. He held evangelistic meetings in Denver, Colorado, and Omaha, Nebraska, which added scores of new members to the churches in those cities.

The Central Union did not immediately act on the plan for creating regional or black conferences approved by the General Conference in 1944 because the total membership of the black churches in its territory – around 700 – did not seem sufficient. However, as the success of Rowe’s evangelistic meetings demonstrated, that number was growing, and the prospects looked good for it reaching a size comparable to small conferences. In 1946, the African American believers in the union submitted a request for organization of a regional conference to commence in that territory, which included Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

Rowe was called to lead the Central States Mission, which began operation January 1, 1947, with 798 members. This was a preliminary step toward formation of a conference. As a “mission,” Central States was still formally under the management of the Central Union. Thus, Rowe’s title was “superintendent” of the mission, but his responsibilities were essentially the same as a president and, in later years, denominationally produced publications would identify him as such.⁴

After a year and a half of leadership in Central States, Rowe accepted an assignment from the Allegheny Conference to serve as a revivalist. Soon afterwards, though, he received an urgent call to take charge of the Shiloh Church in Chicago. He preached his first sermon as pastor of this large congregation on April 8, 1950. He led the congregation in acquiring a church complex to house its expanding work at 70th and South Michigan avenues. A Bible school that he organized at Shiloh proved effective in adding members to the church.⁵

In 1954, the Lake Region Conference asked to Rowe to go to Detroit to lead another large congregation – Hartford Avenue – in buying a new church home. By mid-1955, they were negotiating for the property of what became known as the City Temple Church.

When that deal closed, Rowe, who was nearing retirement, requested a lighter assignment. He was sent to Cassopolis, Michigan, where he took charge of the Cassopolis-South Bend-Elkhart District. Still evangelizing in his final pastorate, he planted a new church in Niles. After retiring from pastoral ministry, he served another three years as chaplain of Riverside Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee.

Just over a decade after the death of Bessie Coleman Rowe, his wife and ministry partner throughout his four and a half decades of fulltime service,⁶ Thomas M. Rowe died March 22, 1979 at age 85. He was buried in Sweetwater, Tennessee, next to his third wife, Luemma Browder Rowe.⁷

At conclusion of his 46 years of ministry, Rowe looked back with gratitude to God for “1,350 souls added to the church by baptism, as well as enabling us to house three of our larger congregations in representative church homes.”⁸

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Except where otherwise noted, the information in this article derives from Thomas M. Rowe, "My 46-Year Ministry," *North American Informant*, March-April 1968, 2-3; and Thomas M. Rowe, interview by author, January 8, 1978.
2. In "My 46-Year Ministry," Rowe stated that Ephesus Church had 525 members when he arrived as pastor. Other credible sources report 775 as the total: W.A. Nelson, "Exchange of Workers," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, February 15, 1939, 2, 4; "Ephesus S.D.A. Church," *New York Age*, December 31, 1938, 9.
3. Baxter L. Leach, "Seventh Day Adventists Buy \$350,000 Church in Harlem," *New York Age*, July 22, 1939, 9.
4. Thomas M. Rowe, "Organization and Progress," *North American Informant*, February 1947, 8-9; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, second revised edition (1996), s.v. "Central States Conference."
5. Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of American Seventh-day Adventists With an African Heritage* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1984), 221.
6. "Necrology – 1967-1968," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1969), 435.
7. "Luemma Browder Rowe," Find A Grave, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/41721601>.
8. "My 46-Year Ministry," 3.

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