



Lewis C. Sheafe.

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

Sheafe, Lewis Charles (1859–1938)

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Lewis C. Sheafe was Adventism's foremost black evangelist during the formative years of the church's work among African Americans around the turn of the 20th century and one of the most widely-acclaimed albeit controversial preachers in the church as a whole.

Background, Calling, and Education

Lewis Sheafe was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 16, 1859. His parents, Joseph and Louise Beaullette Sheafe, were born into slavery but gained their freedom prior to his birth. Joseph Sheafe fought for the Union during the Civil War but did not return to the family, his fate unknown.¹

In 1865 Louise Sheafe moved to Boston, Massachusetts, with Lewis and his younger brother, Joseph. Lewis received much of his early education from his mother because an injury to his eye in 1869 made it difficult for him to study in school for sustained periods. As a young man, Lewis took up farming in West Dedham, about 15 miles southwest of Boston.²

Converted to Christ at age 15, Lewis engaged in an intensive quest for biblical truth over a period of years to resolve the question of which denomination to join, finally affiliating with the Baptist faith. In 1885, a growing conviction that God was calling him to "Go preach to your people" led him to enroll at Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C., founded by the American Baptist Home Missionary Society in 1867 to educate freedmen for the ministry.³

Given the sketchiness of his previous education, Sheafe took the "normal" (general studies) program as well as the theological program, completing both in three years. During his final year (1887-1888) he also pastored a small congregation, the Beulah Baptist Church in nearby Alexandria, Virginia.⁴ Sheafe was one of eight students who gave a brief speech at his graduation ceremony on June 2, 1888. Frederick Douglass, who stopped by—apparently unannounced—and took a seat with the Wayland faculty, gave an impromptu speech after the graduates received their diplomas.⁵ Four days after his graduation, Lewis, by then 28, married one of his teachers in the Normal Department, 23-year-old Annie C. Howard, in a ceremony at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.⁶

Eminent Baptist Divine

In November 1888, Lewis and Annie moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he became pastor of Pilgrim Baptist Church. The couple's first two children, Clara (1889) and Howard (1891) were born in St. Paul. The family moved

to Ohio in August 1892 where Sheafe became pastor first of the Mahoning Avenue Baptist Church in Youngstown, then, beginning in December 1894, of the Jerusalem Baptist Church in Urbana, a small town about 40 miles west of Columbus. Their final child, Lewis, Jr., was born in Urbana in 1896.⁷

During each of these pastorates, Sheafe received enthusiastic acclaim for his effectiveness as a preacher, exemplified by a notice in the *Salem Daily News* that “Rev. Lewis C. Sheafe, the eloquent colored divine of Youngstown, will preach at the Methodist church on next Sunday.”⁸ That the church referred to was neither black nor Baptist illustrates that the appeal of Sheafe’s preaching was not restricted by racial or denominational boundaries. In Ohio, the Young People’s Society of the Christian Endeavor became Sheafe’s primary arena of interdenominational and interracial activism. He became, according to an Akron newspaper, “well known all over the State” as “a colored speaker of unusual ability.”⁹

As racial oppression worsened in the nation during the final years of the 19th century, Sheafe connected with national organizations that formed to advocate for civil rights. In 1889 he was designated chaplain of the St. Paul chapter of the Afro-American League (AAL), “the earliest substantial national organization-building effort” on behalf of “racial justice activism,”¹⁰ and in 1891 he was an organizer of the Minnesota Civil Rights Committee, set up to push the national AAL to bolder action in mounting a legal challenge to new segregation laws.¹¹

In Ohio, Sheafe, both in newspapers and in public speaking, protested governmental inaction against lynching and new state measures to disenfranchise black voters. At an Emancipation day celebration in Springfield, Ohio, in September 1895, he caused a “pronounced sensation,” according to one newspaper, with an impassioned denunciation of the Republican party for its betrayal of black Americans, thereby adding to mounting evidence that “the negro is in earnest in his demand for social recognition.”¹²

Apostle of Seventh-day Adventism

What Sheafe called “the greatest and most eventful change” in his ministerial career occurred 10 months later:¹³ While seeking help with unspecified health issues at Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1896, he accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message. He preached his first Sabbath sermon as an Adventist at Battle Creek Tabernacle on July 18, 1896.¹⁴ After completing a short medical missionary training course at the Sanitarium during the summer, Sheafe engaged in itinerant evangelistic and revival preaching in the Ohio Conference for the remainder of 1896 and into April 1897.¹⁵

His preaching earned him accolades from the overwhelmingly white Adventist membership in Battle Creek and in Ohio. John Harvey Kellogg, director of Battle Creek Sanitarium, for example, described Sheafe as “an orator, a wonderfully able man,” in a letter to Ellen White. He went on to extol the black preacher as “a more liberally educated and cultured man [who] can deliver a more forcible address than any other Seventh-day Adventist minister,” adding, “We have not a white minister who can begin to stand beside him.”¹⁶

Sheafe testified in 1899 that “it was largely through benefit derived from treatment at the sanitarium, what I learned from its health foods and principles, that fully opened my eyes to present truth.”¹⁷ His embrace of Seventh-day Adventism grew out of his commitment both to pursuit of the truth as revealed in Scripture and to liberation for his oppressed people: “I believe that Seventh-day Adventists have a truth which, if they will let it get a hold of them, can do more in this field [the black South] to demonstrate the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ than can any other people,” Sheafe affirmed at the 1899 General Conference, speaking in favor of a proposal for expanding development of schools and health clinics in the South.¹⁸

In 1897 the General Conference Committee issued Sheafe a ministerial license and assigned him to conduct evangelism in Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁹ At the time, there were only two other ordained black ministers and seven black Adventist churches with a combined membership of about 100.²⁰ After a brief time in Louisville, Sheafe became pastor of the Lexington, Kentucky, church and moved his family there in December 1897. The congregation included a remarkably high proportion of well-educated, high-achieving members, but had become fractious. Sheafe guided the church to vigorous involvement in the various aspects of Adventism’s holistic mission—health ministry, religious liberty, community engagement (Christian Help Work), and evangelism.²¹ It was not a good experience for his family, however, as Sheafe found it impossible to support them on the wages he was sent from the General Conference. It seemed best for the family to move to Mount Vernon, Ohio, in August 1898, where the children could attend an Adventist school.²² Sheafe’s home remained in Mount Vernon for the next four years, but he was away most of the time, continuing his work in the South.

At the General Conference session the following year, Sheafe was appointed a delegate “to represent the colored race,” and was the first black minister to preach at a GC session. On March 4, the final Sabbath of the conference, he was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister of the gospel.²³

As with most Adventist ministers in the South, Sheafe’s evangelistic gains were modest. The first of his two most successful endeavors came in Georgetown, Kentucky, during the summer of 1898, where he and his associate, J. R. Buster, conducted meetings that raised a company of 15 new believers, both black and white meeting together.²⁴ The second, in Aiken, South Carolina, during the summer of 1900, resulted in a company of 12 “Sabbathkeepers.”²⁵

The effort in Aiken was part of an initiative Sheafe envisioned for centering evangelistic work on black colleges and training institutes in the South, using health education as a starting point. He also had initial success at Claflin University and South Carolina State College in Orangeburg and Voorhees Industrial School in Denmark, but he lacked the resources to sustain the work. The seeds for this initiative had been planted by conversations with Dr. Kellogg and Almira Steele, director of the Steele Home for Needy Children in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where Sheafe had conducted revival meetings each Fall beginning in 1897. He presented a proposal to the General Conference Committee soon after the 1899 session, but it had received at best tepid approval and no tangible support.²⁶

Meanwhile, Sheafe's outspokenness against racial segregation generated controversy. At a camp meeting in Knoxville in 1899, for example, Sheafe reportedly asserted that "the races should be placed upon social equality."²⁷ The tempest seems to have been quickly calmed, but with some the perception only strengthened that he represented a positive danger to the acceptance of the Southern racial order deemed essential to the survival of the church's mission in that region.²⁸

Thus, while church leaders acknowledged, even celebrated, his gifts and looked to him as the church's foremost black spokesperson, they seemed to show little interest in his vision and withheld leadership agency from him. The Adventist reality, he was finding, fell far short of the racial egalitarianism he had perceived in Battle Creek in 1896. "In many cases for warmth I've found coldness, for freedom bondage, and for confidence distrust," he wrote to Ellen White in May 1899.²⁹

The juxtaposition of public affirmation with paternalistic control was evident at the 1901 General Conference in Battle Creek. Sheafe sang at least three solos and preached at least twice during the lengthy session. An observation by Arthur G. Daniells, newly-elected to the church's top leadership position at the session, expressed a widely-shared sentiment: "Personally I like the man very much. He is a talented man, both as a speaker and a singer, and has the fullest confidence of all his people."³⁰

The recognition, though, seemed not to extend to matters of policy. On April 21, Sheafe proposed a department-like plan for promoting the church's work among black Americans parallel to that which had been approved for reaching German and Scandinavian immigrants then arriving in large numbers. He contended that if "lines were marked out" where black ministers could work, not "under a ring or under a gagbit, but with freedom . . . I believe the work would wonderfully advance, and more would be coming into the truth." His proposal was sent to an ad hoc committee that was to include "brethren especially representing the colored work throughout the field." That category, though, turned out to include three white leaders, but not Sheafe. The exclusion, probably more than the group's recommendation against the advisability of his proposal at that time, made Sheafe feel that he was still under a "gagbit" with no meaningful influence over the direction of the work for his people.³¹

Washington, D.C.: Crucible for Adventist Race Relations

Nevertheless, Sheafe would remain unrivalled as the preeminent black Adventist throughout the first decade of the 20th century. It was a decade in which the black membership increased to about 1,300 and the number of ordained ministers reached 14.³² Yet it was also the decade when Adventism's accommodation to racism was institutionalized and dynamics that would both empower and frustrate the progress of the Adventist cause among black Americans were set in motion. Interaction between Sheafe and GC President A.G. Daniells stood at the center of nearly all of these developments.

At Daniells invitation, Sheafe attended the Southern Union Conference's first constituency session, convened at Nashville, January 3-13, 1902, where he became the first black minister appointed to the board of Huntsville

Industrial School (now Oakwood University). Ellen White, also in attendance, observed that Sheafe preached “an excellent discourse” on Sunday evening, January 5, at the church recently acquired for the black Adventist congregation in Nashville.³³

Though racial separation in meetings and schools had become the general Adventist practice in the South over the preceding decade, the “color question” remained unsettled, with powerful influences in the church, not least the testimonies of Ellen White, upholding the ideals of racial inclusion and equality.³⁴ But Daniells believed the question needed to be settled at this meeting, crucial in shaping the church’s work in the South. He gained unanimous albeit unwritten agreement, including apparent assent from the “colored brethren,” that Adventists should not join any effort “to bring about an equality of the races” and that “separate meetings of the races” was advisable “in those parts of the country where it causes offense for them to mix.”³⁵

Before the Nashville meetings closed, Daniells encouraged Sheafe to accept a new assignment of critical importance—evangelism in Washington, D.C. He believed that he had secured the black preacher’s agreement to conduct his work in Washington in harmony with the racial policies just adopted in Nashville. For Sheafe, it was not a matter of personal agreement with such a plan but a pledge not to stand in the way if the people on the ground wanted to work along separate racial lines. He made clear to Daniells, though, that he was not willing to take the role of enforcer.³⁶

Race was a live question in Washington because the Adventist church there had been racially mixed since its inception in 1889, with 100 white and 54 black members reported as of 1901. Congregational leaders representing both races were passionately dedicated to the church as an interracial fellowship and adamantly opposed to any “color line” distinctions, believing that interracial fellowship on a free and equal basis was of central importance to the witness of Adventism in the nation’s capital.³⁷

By contrast, Daniells wanted Washington, D.C. to model for the church at large that its work could best thrive by building up strong separate congregations for each race. His plan called for two simultaneous tent meetings in the summer of 1902, one for blacks conducted by Sheafe, and the other for whites conducted by Judson S. Washburn, followed by division of the Washington Church into two racially separate congregations.³⁸ However, the realities that emerged in the nation’s capital that summer would shatter the assumptions underlying the General Conference plan.

Sheafe and his family moved from Ohio to Washington, D.C. in mid-May, and he began his meetings on June 1, assisted by Fred H. Seeney. Annie Sheafe assisted with music as did their 13-year-old daughter, Clara, who played an organ at the tent meetings. Sheafe’s evangelism caught fire as never before. “Thousands Hear Him, Negro Minister Draws Large Crowds to His Tent,” reported the *Washington Post*.³⁹ “A New Faith Comes” proclaimed the *Colored American*, reporting that Sheafe’s meetings “are nightly crowded by the best citizens of the District of every faith and of both races, who flock to hear his convincing, logical, and matchless eloquence.”

Sheafe's meetings both thoroughly overshadowed Washburn's and overturned Daniells' assumption about a clear-cut racial bifurcation. Sheafe would baptize approximately 15 white people (out of a total close to 75) in connection with the effort whereas Washburn never had any specific baptismal numbers to report at all!⁴¹

Still, the division proceeded as planned in late September.⁴² About 40 of the white members formed what became known as the Memorial Church, pastored by Washburn. About 30-35 remained in the racially mixed congregation, now called First Church, with Sheafe as pastor. With the adherents won through Sheafe's evangelism added to the count, First Church reported a membership of 168—122 black and 46 white—as of March 1903.⁴³ Although the division left a bitter and long-lasting legacy, the immediate furor subsided and the General Conference continued its support for Sheafe's ministry in Washington, D.C.

The Public Arena

Sheafe's evangelistic success in 1902 made him something of a celebrity in Washington, D.C.'s large and influential black community. He received frequent invitations to speak at prominent venues, such as the Bethel Literary and Historical Society, "the center of black intellectual life in the capital" from the 1880s to the 1920s.⁴⁴ There, where audiences gathered to hear the likes of W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington and Mary Church Terrell as part of the same lecture series, Sheafe garnered a respectful hearing for Adventist teachings about the Sabbath and the United States in the light of apocalyptic prophecy.⁴⁵ He continued to receive laudatory coverage in the *Colored American* and the *Washington Bee*, whose editor, W. Calvin Chase, declared Sheafe to be "the most learned minister in the United States among the Negroes."⁴⁶

"The Lord has given you tact and skill in knowledge to proclaim the last message of mercy to our world," Ellen White later wrote to Sheafe.⁴⁷ While his forthright preaching did stir controversy, he also won the esteem of the city's black clergy and sustained collegial interaction with them. For example, a committee that included some of the city's most prestigious black ministers selected Sheafe for the clergy slot in the line-up of speakers for a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1903. In a brief rundown of speakers for the event, the *Washington Post* described Sheafe as "the well-known evangelist"—testament to the name recognition he had gained despite having been in the city only six months.⁴⁸

The Adventist evangelist also engaged in advocacy for racial justice in the nation's capital. He participated, for instance, in the organization of the Negro Suffrage League of the District of Columbia, organized in September 1903. The D.C. Suffrage League was one of several endeavors that would eventually lead to organization of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the struggle over the precedent or "mold" that would be set in Washington, D.C. for Seventh-day Adventism's handling of the American racial dilemma continued and took on heightened significance when the General Conference transferred its headquarters from Battle Creek, Michigan, to suburban Takoma Park,

straddling the D.C.-Maryland border, in the summer of 1903. The choice of that locale had been influenced by Judson S. Washburn's numerous letters to Adventist leaders during the preceding months. In those same letters he kept up a barrage of criticism levelled against Sheafe and the First Church for preaching a "political gospel" that would set a "terrible" mold for Adventism's response to the racial question. And, he convinced the General Conference to undertake an urgent \$10,000 fund raising campaign to pay for a church building he had acquired to house his congregation.⁵⁰

The People's Church Protest

After the General Conference move, though, Daniells encouraged Sheafe to form a new congregation with the converts from his 1903 evangelistic campaign. Accordingly, the People's Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized on December 3 with 51 members. The name was selected to signal that the church welcomed all people without regard to color or class, and it did include some white members. But in fact it was Adventism's first predominantly black church to develop in a large city. Daniells now touted the fact that Adventism now had three congregations in Washington, D.C.—one white, one black, and one interracial—covering the full range of options along the color line.⁵¹

For the next two years the Adventist work in the nation's capital progressed with little racial disturbance in evidence. Ellen White, during her extended stay in 1904 to help shepherd development of the church's institutions in Takoma Park, met with Sheafe, wrote warmly in correspondence about his work, and preached both at the People's Church and the First Church.⁵²

Under Sheafe's leadership, the People's Church grew to 130 members by the spring of 1905, when it acquired an impressive brick edifice at 12th and V Streets, Northwest, amidst the black businesses, theaters, night spots, churches, and benevolent organizations clustered in the U Street district. The building and adjoining property were more than sufficient for beginning a training school for black Adventist workers.⁵³ Sheafe had already begun to mentor some of his converts for ministry, including attorney W. H. Green, who would rise to leadership in the black Adventist cause.⁵⁴ Sheafe also launched a periodical, the *Messenger*, in June 1905.⁵⁵ The People's Church seemed well-positioned as the base for a work that, as Sheafe put it, "will be far-reaching in its effects."⁵⁶

The church building and property were acquired for \$10,000, the same amount expended to acquire the Memorial Church two years before. But there would be no vigorous denominational fund-raising campaign nor a single dollar appropriated from the General Conference for the People's Church. The funds came entirely from the members and from the support Sheafe raised from donors outside the church. Also, while the denomination, by 1905, had raised \$150,000 to establish the General Conference office, the Review and Herald Publishing Association, and a new training college and sanitarium in Takoma Park, the amount devoted toward black educational and medical work in the region totaled zero.⁵⁷

With no progress in sight toward resolving the inequity by the end of 1905, Sheafe believed the time had come to confront the denominational leadership. The People's Church addressed a letter to the General Conference Committee in late February 1906 pointedly asking if they were "privileged to accept the services and benefits of the schools, hospitals, and sanitariums" operated by the denomination. If none could "specifically and unequivocally" be identified, the church requested "the privilege of using its tithes and offerings for the purpose of creating such facilities as its work may demand from time to time."⁵⁸

The General Conference Committee's response amounted to tacit confirmation of a three-pronged injustice: 1) the People's Church members would be excluded from the Takoma Park institutions on account of race; 2) no definite steps were underway for the development of black institutions for health and education that would enable them to fulfill their role in advancing the "whole message" of Adventism; 3) they would not be permitted use of their tithes and offerings to meet the need.⁵⁹

The People's Church responded by gradually bringing tithe remittances to an end. Matters became further complicated when Sheafe, after a visit to Battle Creek in November, openly expressed support for Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, whose long-running conflict with the General Conference over control of Adventism's medical and benevolent enterprises had become irreconcilable. Authority thus became intertwined with race in the GC-People's Church clash. On January 15, 1907, the People's Church claimed congregational independence from conference authority as a scriptural prerogative.⁶⁰

A letter from Ellen White dated February 4, 1907, admonished Sheafe to, "Stop right where you are." Her testimony did not address the specifics of his course regarding race relations but concentrated on the "spiritual pride" that she saw as underlying his dangerous dalliance with Dr. Kellogg's Battle Creek and strife between the preacher and his wife, Annie.⁶¹

Sheafe had difficulty accepting the letter as inspired testimony because he believed Ellen White had been unduly influenced by Daniells and had not heard his side of the story. Thus, questioning the Spirit of Prophecy (Ellen White's prophetic gift) joined racial protest and disloyalty to conference organization in clouding Lewis Sheafe's standing as a Seventh-day Adventist minister. On February 26, 1907, he returned his ministerial credentials to the General Conference.⁶²

For a time racial schism in Adventism was widely anticipated, but momentum toward it stalled. Sheafe enjoyed unrivalled recognition by black Adventist ministers as "the "greatest colored man in the cause,"⁶³ as one of them put it, but rather than follow his lead, they put their energies into reconciling him with the denomination!⁶⁴

Daniells and other denominational leaders also continued to believe that Sheafe's gifts could outweigh his liabilities if he could be induced to return to conference work on regular terms. The fact that the People's Church remained Seventh-day Adventist in doctrine and practice except for congregational independence helped keep this hope alive. So did the fact that no functional alliance between Sheafe, Kellogg, and others in opposition to General Conference authority ever materialized.

Amidst the upheaval, Sheafe suffered a tragic double loss. His talented daughter, Clara, contracted tuberculosis and died on December 23, 1907, at the age of 16. His wife Annie died from the same disease just three months later, March 4, 1908. She was only 42 years old.⁶⁵

Even though Sheafe's secession movement did not quickly spread, the loss of its most effective black minister and largest congregation (some 10% of the African American membership at the time) gave impetus to the denomination's first major structural change intended to enhance its effectiveness in attracting and retaining black adherents.⁶⁶ In an "appeal" submitted to the General Conference in early 1909, 12 leading black ministers warned that the "loss of confidence" from black believers that the major Protestant bodies in America had experienced "has come to us"—an unmistakable allusion to Sheafe and the People's Church. The problem "will grow stronger," they said, without action to "restore and conserve" the "confidence of the race."⁶⁷

In response to the ministers' appeal, the General Conference of 1909 approved a plan already under consideration for establishing what, in broad terms, Sheafe had proposed in 1901—a department for organizing and fostering all phases of the Adventist work for America's black population. The black ministers in attendance at the 1909 session welcomed the action as a potentially effective step, despite limitations such as the appointment of a white man to head the department.⁶⁸

Formation of the Negro Department had no direct impact on the impasse between Sheafe and the General Conference. He demanded concrete action to redress the injustices the People's Church had protested in 1906 as a pre-condition for returning to the denominational fold while Daniells insisted that an unconditional pledge of denominational loyalty on Sheafe's part must come first. Instead, it was Sheafe's marriage to 35-year-old schoolteacher and Bible worker Lucy Parker Whetsel on March 27, 1911, in Madison, Alabama, that would prove to be a prominent, perhaps decisive, factor leading to a breakthrough. Her first husband, O. N. Whetsel, was conducting successful ministry in Florida until illness took his life in 1906, leaving Lucy with two small children—Margaret (b. 1904) and Arthur (b. 1905).⁶⁹ Sheafe's new bride spoke openly and confidently about influencing her husband back to full-fledged Seventh-day Adventist ministry.⁷⁰

Short-lived Reconciliation

In April 1913 Sheafe sent a conciliatory letter to denominational headquarters that prepared the way for a public reconciliation at the General Conference session set to begin the following month in Takoma Park.⁷¹ On May 30, speaking to the session delegates on behalf of his congregation, Sheafe acknowledged that "the separation was a sad mistake, for which we are heartily sorry," and declared their desire to re-unite with the denomination's organized work in proclaiming "this glorious message of love and mercy."⁷²

While the People's Church was accepted into the fellowship of the District of Columbia Conference, Sheafe, as part of the reconciliation agreement, accepted re-assignment to Los Angeles, California. After the addition of a daughter, Doris Elizabeth, born October 14, 1913, the Sheafe family made its way across the nation, arriving in

southern California on December 7 to begin a new chapter of life and ministry. Sheafe became pastor of the thriving Furlong Tract church in Los Angeles, the first black Adventist church organized on the west coast (1908).⁷³ His primary mission, though, was evangelism, and his first year of labor led to the organization of two new churches in the early months of 1915: Berean, with 30 members, and Watts, with 17 members.⁷⁴

But controversy soon overshadowed these achievements, with Sheafe's attitude towards the authority of Ellen White's testimonies now the central issue. More specifically, the leadership of the Southern California and Pacific Union conferences pressed him to publicly affirm confidence in the divine inspiration of Volume 9 of *Testimonies for the Church* in which excerpts on race relations are assembled from various manuscripts and letters without explanation of their contexts. Sheafe could not reconcile what he perceived as a contradiction between Ellen White's statements and biblical principles. He offered to continue in ministry and not say anything about "Volume 9" but, he said, that was unacceptable to conference leaders.⁷⁵

Free Seventh Day Adventists

Convinced that his only options were "to withdraw or give up righteous principle," Sheafe resigned from employment in the Southern California Conference on September 11, 1915.⁷⁶ On September 15, the Berean Church voted to withdraw from the Southern California Conference with Sheafe as their pastor, taking as its new name the Berean Church of Free Seventh Day Adventists.⁷⁷

This time, Sheafe's break from the denomination was far more public than in 1907. "Seventh Day Adventist Lose Race Elder" proclaimed the first page of the October 9 edition of the *Chicago Defender*, with versions of the same article also featured in black newspapers across the nation. The December 1915 issue of the NAACP magazine, the *Crisis*, reported: "Reverend Lewis C. Sheafe, with his congregation, have withdrawn from the Seventh Day Adventist Church, in Los Angeles, California, because of its expressed unchristian attitude toward the colored members."⁷⁸

In May 1916 Sheafe joined John W. Manns, based in Savannah, Georgia, in establishing the first separate black Adventist denomination—the Free Seventh Day Adventists.⁷⁹ The two preachers explained that because "persistent efforts for a remedy" to racial injustice in the Seventh-day Adventist church had failed, the only viable option remaining for black Adventists as a "powerless minority" was withdrawal.⁸⁰

In Washington, D.C., the People's Church, without Sheafe's direct involvement, withdrew once again from the conference connection in 1916, due to lack of progress on the same issues that had precipitated its first move to independence a decade before. However, the People's Church did not join the Free SDA denomination.⁸¹

Sheafe and Manns targeted Jacksonville, Florida, for a joint evangelistic effort in 1917 but disagreements put an end to their alliance less than a year after launching their new denomination. Lewis and Lucy Sheafe turned their attention to launching a training school in Jacksonville to provide opportunity for "the poorest and most

needy class.”⁸² That endeavor failed during its first year, however, and Sheafe returned to Washington in 1918 to once again pastor the People’s Church, where he would remain for the remaining 20 years of his life.

The “defections” of Sheafe and Manns, as had the former’s first withdrawal nearly a decade before, stimulated action from denominational leaders to salvage the loyalty of black Adventists who remained in conference-affiliated churches. At the 1916 Annual Council, the North American Division Conference (NADC) voted substantial funds to acquire or build houses of worship for black Adventist congregations, including \$8,000 for Washington, D.C.⁸³ After 14 years, a tangible gesture toward reducing the stark financial inequity along the color line in Washington, D.C. had finally come about.

At the 1916 Council the NADC also went on record acknowledging the racial disparity in Adventist education. Progress would be painfully slow, fitful and inadequate, but the issue was now on the agenda and would not go away. Finally, the racial crisis of 1916 helped make the denominational leadership receptive to appeals from black ministers that one of their number be elected as head of the North American Negro Department at the next General Conference session. W. H. Green was selected for the responsibility at the 1918 session (originally scheduled for 1917) in San Francisco.⁸⁴

The People’s Minister

With Sheafe as pastor, the People’s Church continued to identify itself as “Seventh Day Adventist” into the mid 1920s. He retained a loyal base of members at the church, but it never seemed to grow much beyond 100 members—its approximate size after the withdrawal of those who formed the denominationally-affiliated Ephesus (later Dupont Park) Church in 1916.

In 1921, the *Washington Bee* newspaper referred to Sheafe as “the people’s minister” and fulfilling that function in Washington, D.C.’s black community seems to best define his ministry going forward from 1918. He frequently spoke, lectured, and sang at prominent cultural venues such as the Twelfth Street YMCA and the Bethel Literary and Cultural Society, and was in frequent demand as a guest speaker for special occasions at black churches of virtually every denominational variety.⁸⁵

In the 1920s Sheafe embraced Marcus Garvey’s radical message of racial dignity and solidarity in the world struggle against the oppression of European peoples. In January 1922, Sheafe purchased a \$100 bond issued by Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and in 1926 gave the opening night speech for the third convention of the Washington, D.C. UNIA chapter.⁸⁶ Despite the vast differences between the UNIA and the Seventh-day Adventist church, Sheafe’s support for both was driven by motivations that persisted throughout his career. He was more interested in that which offered meaningful hope and practical help for racial advancement than in rigid ideological consistency, and he was willing to risk defying convention by supporting radical movements that offered a promising way forward.

In keeping with a long-standing interest in health care, and to supplement his income, Sheafe earned a degree at Central Chiropractic College in Washington. After graduating in 1924 at the age of 64, he set up a successful practice while continuing as pastor of the People's Church.⁸⁷

Marital estrangement once again developed during these same years. Lucy apparently never moved back to live in Washington full-time when Sheafe returned to the People's Church in 1918. She instead found employment at Fessenden Academy that kept her in Florida while school was in session. The couple entered a formal separation agreement on May 15, 1924 but remained legally married until Lewis's death.⁸⁸

Though a history of the Church of God (Seventh Day) indicates that the People's Church affiliated with that denomination in 1923, it continued to identify in public listings as independent "Seventh Day Adventist" until 1926 when Sheafe announced that the church would once again connect with a Sabbath-observing denomination, this time the Seventh Day Baptists. He cited favorably the denomination's polity in which each church was "its own sovereign" as well as the absence of creedal statements: "The Bible with its Christ, faith and repentance, forgiveness of sins, immersion, the Sabbath of Christ, godly living, the fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of all men, is the only creed they recognize."⁸⁹ Sheafe was active in the governing councils of the predominantly white Seventh Day Baptist denomination, serving, for example, as moderator for the Washington Union Association of Seventh Day Baptists, and as a member of the national board of education beginning in 1933.⁹⁰

Though his health was declining by the mid-1930s, Sheafe continued his pastoral duties until just 12 days before his death from undisclosed causes on June 11, 1938, at the age of 78.⁹¹

Legacy

Lewis C. Sheafe's long and turbulent journey took him through a procession of denominational affiliations—Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Free Seventh Day Adventist, independent Seventh Day Adventist, Church of God (Seventh Day), and Seventh Day Baptist. Along the way he was active in a procession of civil rights organizations—Afro-American League, NAACP, and UNIA. Two unchanging goals animated all of these varied endeavors: racial justice and radical faithfulness to biblical truth.

He was in full connection with the Seventh-day Adventist church for only about 12 of his 50 years in ministry. Yet, in 1927, more than a decade after his final break with the denomination, a celebration of his 25 years of ministry in Washington, D.C., looked back to 1902 when he stirred the nation's capital preaching the Seventh-day Adventist message as the defining achievement of his career.⁹² A newspaper article in 1902 thus may have coined the most fitting epitaph for Sheafe's life by referring to him as the "noted apostle of Seventh Day Adventism."⁹³

Few careers, if any, have demonstrated as dramatically as Sheafe's both the potential of Adventism as an agency for black liberation and interracial healing, as well as the devastating consequences of failure to rise to that potential by replicating the destructive patterns of the surrounding society. For a few critically important years, this extraordinarily gifted gospel minister inspired, led, and nurtured the early development of black Seventh-day Adventism. His evangelism gave rise to and his leadership put a lasting stamp on the two congregations that for most of the 20th century would anchor black Adventism in Washington, D.C.—the Ephesus (Dupont Park) and First churches. From these two churches the Committee for the Advancement of Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventist formed in 1943 to take up the unfinished business of confronting the institutional racism that the People's Church protested in 1906. The regional (black) conferences and other reforms prompted by the activism of the 1943 Committee arguably constituted a decisive turn in church race relations, opening the way for further change in the decades to come.⁹⁴

It is impossible to calculate the trauma and loss to all involved in the conflicts that brought about his alienation from Adventism. Yet the challenges Lewis C. Sheafe raised prompted structural adjustments intended to strengthen Adventism's viability as a religious alternative for black people in America.

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