

Justiss-Vance, Valarie Omega (1913–2015)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

Douglas Morgan is a graduate of Union College (B.A., theology, 1978) in Lincoln, Nebraska and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., history of Christianity, 1992). He has served on the faculties of Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland and Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. His publications include *Adventism and the American Republic* (University of Tennessee Press, 2001) and *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Review and Herald, 2010). He is the ESDA assistant editor for North America.

Valarie Justiss-Vance was a social worker, educator, and activist who helped lead efforts to improve race relations in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Early Years

Valarie Omega Justiss was born January 7, 1913, in Mount Pleasant, Texas, to Jacob and Beatrice Ann Price Justiss, the second of their four children. In the autumn of 1919 the family moved from east Texas to Lima, Ohio, where Jacob Justiss, Sr. was employed in the automobile industry. By 1930 they had settled in Toledo, Ohio, where Jacob, Sr. worked in maintenance of railroad car steam engines.¹

After graduating from Waite High School in Toledo, Valarie enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1931.² Before leaving home for college, she had become interested in Seventh-day Adventism through her older sister Marie, who had stepped out from the family's Baptist heritage to join the Adventist church in Toledo. While a college student in Washington, D.C., Valarie attended Ephesus Church where she made her commitment to the Adventist faith.³

Social Work Scholar



Valarie Justiss-Vance.

Photo courtesy of Vincent Hill.

Valarie's dedication to bettering human social conditions became evident during her college years at Howard, as did her skills as a scholar and communicator. In 1934, for example, her analysis of health conditions in Toledo won second prize in a national essay contest conducted by the Committee on Tuberculosis Among Negroes of the National Tuberculosis Association⁴

After graduating with a B.A. from Howard in 1935, Justiss returned to Toledo where she became associate editor of the *Toledo Press* newspaper while studying for an M.A. in social work at the University of Toledo. As a graduate assistant she was appointed director of women's activities at the YWCA. After completing the M.A. in 1936, she taught English for two years at Lane College, an HBCU in Jackson, Tennessee. In 1938, Justiss moved to Chicago to pursue her interests in social work, again combining academic research with public service. She was hired as a senior case worker in the Chicago Welfare Administration and then began work on a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. In that program she was a research assistant in the university's School of Social Work Administration.⁵ She would later transfer to Ohio State University.

Justiss returned to Washington, D.C. in 1940, accepting the position of research assistant in social work for the District of Columbia public schools. While in Washington during the 1940s she also cofounded the black-themed radio program "Americans All." In 1949, she completed her PhD at Ohio State University. Her dissertation on "The Unmarried Father," was one of the earliest comprehensive studies of the problem. In it, Justiss analyzed the societal conditions with which unwed fathers contended and argued that rather than being stereotyped as irresponsible, they should be afforded understanding and respect in constructive endeavors to curb illegitimacy.⁶

Church Activist

Throughout this whirl of high achievement as a scholar and young professional, Valarie Justiss was deeply involved with the church. At Ephesus Church in Washington she served as Sabbath School teacher, superintendent of the youth and young adult Sabbath School division, and church press secretary. She published numerous articles in Adventist periodicals including *Message*, *Youth's Instructor*, *Sabbath School Worker*, and *Church Officers Gazette*.⁷

Justiss's first recorded involvement in combatting racial injustice in the church came during her two years in Chicago (1938-1940). She was part of a movement at the Shiloh Church that pressed the Illinois Conference about the racial disparity in access to a conference youth camp. This effort led to organization of the National Association for the Advancement of Adventist Youth that worked to provide black Adventist young people a full range of opportunities to foster their spiritual and social development.⁸

Justiss was a major force in galvanizing the black Adventist response to the Washington Sanitarium's refusal to admit Lucy Byard because she was black on September 22, 1943, despite a prior agreement by letter to do so.⁹ While signs of significant if very limited improvement in race relations were becoming evident in American

society, racial conditions in the Adventist church seemed to be worsening. The Byard incident was “but a climax to a policy that has been exercised toward our people through the years,” in the words of black Adventist physician Stark O. Cherry.¹⁰

Determined to press for change, a group of lay leaders from the First and Ephesus churches in Washington, D.C. gathered on Saturday night, October 16, 1943, in the back room of a bookstore near Howard University owned by Ephesus church elder Joseph Dodson to prepare for a swiftly arranged meeting the next afternoon, October 17, with the president of the General Conference, J. L. McElhany.¹¹ They wanted the meeting to be more than an airing of grievances with a plea for kinder treatment. Instead, they wanted to impress upon McElhany the reality that the black Adventist laity throughout the nation were uniting to insist upon swift and decisive action towards realization of the racial justice and equality that the Adventist church claimed to espouse.

Overnight, a movement was born. The group chose a name, the Committee for the Advancement of the Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists (hereafter the Committee), selected officers, placed long-distance calls to potential allies, and after midnight roused a church member who ran a print shop to create and print up letterhead for a mailing to set forth the Committee’s agenda call for formation of a nationwide network of affiliated branches.¹² Justiss and Willie Anna Dodson worked through the night to get out the nationwide mailing, repeatedly typing on carbon paper to make six to eight copies at a time.¹³

Valarie Justiss was named corresponding secretary of the Committee. In his book *Angels in Ebony*, Valarie’s brother, pastor and historian Jacob Justiss described his sister’s “kineticism,” along with the “sagacity” of the Committee’s vice president, long-time social activist Alma Scott,¹⁴ and the “planning ability” of its president, Joseph T. Dodson and his wife, educator Willie Anna Dodson as “just the right combination” needed for spearheading the initiative.

Justiss was among the representatives of the Committee who met with the General Conference president on October 17 and presented to him a document outlining four categories of “General Conditions” in the denomination that they believed needed to be addressed. The outline was subsequently expanded and published as an eight-page pamphlet entitled “Shall the Four Freedoms Function in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?” Under the heading “Educational and Medical,” the Committee outlined a pattern of egregious racial discrimination in the church’s institutions. A second category, “Administrative and Supervisory,” called for fair representation of black Adventists in denominational councils and equitable distribution of resources. The third area of concern, “Occupational,” targeted discriminatory denominational hiring practices in staffing conference offices, publishing houses, schools and medical institutions. In the final area, titled “Spiritual,” the Committee addressed several ways in which denominational policies failed to foster appropriate development of Adventism’s entire spiritual program for the African American community, and even hindered it through demeaning treatment of black ministers. The central principle running through the Committee’s manifesto was the imperative of a complete end to racial discrimination and injustice in all phases of denominational life.¹⁵

President McElhany assured the group that the full range of racial problems would be addressed by the General Conference Committee at the Annual Council soon to commence. The Committee now faced the question of follow through, knowing that denominational leaders had formed committees to address racial disparities several times over the preceding two decades, but these efforts had produced little change. Justiss's persistence and clarity were major factors in sustaining the momentum that the Committee initiated. As corresponding secretary, she wrote McElhany several times over the next five months holding him accountable in respectful yet clear and forceful terms for what he had assured the Committee would take place.

Along with racial justice, she asserted the principle of lay participation in church governance in a letter sent December 3, 1943: "We are of the opinion that the most effective work can be done only with the counsel, advice, and cooperation of adequate colored representatives from the laity in any group which may consider this matter." Justiss also signaled to the denomination's president the Committee's ability and willingness to mobilize the black laity nationwide, mentioning the "encouraging communications" that the Committee had received from the laity around the nation and their desire to keep these "field groups," as well as local believers in Washington, D.C., informed about the General Conference's progress on the matters at issue.¹⁶

The lay protest channeled by the Committee and the firm persistence of G. E. Peters, head of the denomination's North American Colored Department, kept pressure on McElhany to implement comprehensive change in denominational racial matters, up to and during the special meeting called in conjunction with the Spring Council in Chicago, April 1944. The foremost outcome—the formation of "colored" or regional conferences—was not a measure the Committee had called for and one that some members did not initially support. Yet most black Adventists soon saw the value in conferences administered by black leaders who had "full executive authority and equal status with other conferences" in the denominational body.¹⁷

With the regional conferences, the African American Adventist work flourished as never before in subsequent decades¹⁸ and eventually proved a foundation for better representation in overall denominational leadership. Other changes in 1944-1945, such as a black editor for *Message* magazine, the launching of the *North American Informant*, a periodical for news and information about the black work, and an upgrade of Riverside Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, the church's sole medical institution dedicated to serving black Americans, also signaled movement toward the changes for which the Committee had lobbied. And, the Committee's effectiveness in influencing these advances owed much to the vision and energy of Valarie Justiss.

Public Servant

After the Committee disbanded—at McElhany's request—in 1944, Justiss lived another seven remarkably productive decades. She remained a loyal Seventh-day Adventist, involved in various aspects of church life, but did not again play a prominent part in future episodes of denominational crisis as she did in 1943-1944. But her contributions in the realm of public service would be many and varied.

Valarie married Samuel Jones Vance (1921-1999), an electrical engineer and Howard University graduate, in a service performed at the university's Rankin Chapel on August 19, 1951. They had one son, Samuel (b. 1952).¹⁹

After two decades with the District of Columbia Public School system, Justiss-Vance accepted appointment in 1960 as director of a three-year project with the Massachusetts Association for the Adult Blind to develop social casework services for blind adults and their families.²⁰ In 1963 she moved to the west coast to take a position with the City of Los Angeles which would include writing social work provisions for the War on Poverty funding during the Lyndon B. Johnson presidential administration. In 1969, Justiss-Vance joined the faculty of the Department of Pediatrics in the College of Medicine, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Then, in 1973 she joined the California Department of Health as a psychiatric social worker and during the same year became a psychological consultant for the Head Start program. She retired from the Department of Health in 1984 but continued her involvement with Head Start until 1999 when she was 86 years old.²¹

Justiss-Vance was the keynote speaker for the Seventh-day Adventist Social Workers Association conference held at Oakwood College in October 1969. The topic of her address, "The Gospel Through Social Work," expressed a major theme running through her entire career.²² Her foremost involvement with the church, beyond the local setting, during her California decades was with Loma Linda University. She served as a mentor for students and for many years was a member of the university board of trustees. After her service on the governing board came to an end, she continued service on the advisory committee to the board for social work.²³ Calvin B. Rock, chair of the Loma Linda board from 1990 to 2002, stated that Justiss-Vance, though by then in her late 70s and 80s, was quite outspoken in advocating progressive measures and was especially concerned for action on behalf of the church's young people.²⁴

Legacy

Valarie Justiss-Vance died in Victorville, California, on June 28, 2015, at the age of 102.²⁵ As a young adult, though her ability to exert influence in the church was triply disadvantaged by her status as a black, female, lay member, she nevertheless used her abilities as an organizer, communicator, and social analyst to protest injustice and thereby helped influence meaningful change. Throughout a long career in social work, she dedicated the same qualities to bettering the lives of others through her expertise on the societal conditions they faced and endeavors to improve those conditions.

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NOTES

1. The public record of her birth spells her middle name with an apostrophe, "Valarie O'Mega Justiss," in "Texas Births and Christenings, 1840-1981," *FamilySearch*, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:2:WWWV-V9T2>; "Valarie Justiss" in "United States Census, 1920," *GenealogyBank*, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://genealogybank.com/#>.
2. "Valarie Justiss Vance," The HistoryMakers, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/valarie-justiss-vance-38>, accessed April 24, 2020.
3. Jacob Justiss, Jr. obituary, funeral program, April 27, 1978, copy held by author; G.E. P[eters], "Achievement!," *North American Informant*, December 1952, 8.
4. Oscar W. Adams, "What Negroes Are Doing," *Birmingham News*, October 21, 1934, 32.
5. Peters, "Achievement!"
6. Ibid; "Unwed Father Should Get Sympathy Too—Sociologist," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 25, 1948, 2.
7. Peters, "Achievement!"; "Adventists Donate \$7,548 For Missions," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 12, 1952, 20.
8. Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony* (Holland, OH: Independently published, 1975), 48-49.
9. Benjamin Baker, "Byard, Lucille (1877-1943)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, December 29, 2020, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9CEA>.

10. Stark O. Cherry to J.L. McElhany, March 9, 1944, J.L. McElhany files, RG 11, Box 10991, Folder "Colored Situation," General Conference Archives (GCA). On the worsening of racial injustice and discrimination in the Adventist church during the 1920s to 1940s, see also Douglas Morgan, *Change Agents: The Lay Movement that Challenged the System and Turned Adventism Toward Racial Justice* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak & Acorn Publishing, 2020), 123-162.
11. Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony*, 43-45.
12. Ibid, 44-45; see also Morgan, *Change Agents*, 10-17; 187-192.
13. Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony*, 45, 57; Vincent Hill, nephew of Valarie Justiss-Vance, email to author, September 29, 2020.
14. Douglas Morgan, "Scott, Alma J. (1874–1957)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=BI3B>.
15. Morgan, *Change Agents*, 192-198; Calvin B. Rock, *Protest and Progress: Black Seventh-day Adventists and the Push for Parity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2018), 46-48.
16. Valarie O. Justiss to J. McElhany, December 3, 1943, J.L. McElhany files, RG 11, Box 10991, Folder "Colored Situation," GCA.
17. "Singleton and Murphy Adventist Executives," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 22, 1945, 1; Rock, *Protest and Progress*, 48-57.
18. Henry E. Felder, "Status, Trends, and Analysis of Seventh-day Adventist Regional Conferences, 1950-2009" *Spectrum* 38, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 42-55.
19. "Dr. Valerie Justiss, S.J. Vance wed in Memorial Chapel at H.U.," *Washington Afro-American*, 9; "Samuel Vance, retired engineer," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 27, 1999, 12; "Samuel Vance" in *Ohio, U.S., Birth Index, 1908-1998, Ancestry.com*, accessed August 1, 2022,
20. "Adult Blind Group Honors Dr. Vance," *Boston Globe*, January 29, 1960, 10.
21. "Valarie Justiss Vance," The HistoryMakers. This source indicates that Dr. Justiss-Vance became an assistant professor at the University of California in 1970 but according to the Huntsville Times article cited below she was already on the UCLA faculty by the fall of 1969.
22. "Social Worker Conference Set for Oakwood," *Huntsville Times*, October 29, 1969, 9.
23. "Valarie Justiss Vance," The HistoryMakers.
24. Calvin B. Rock, interview by author, March 24, 2020.
25. "Valarie Omega Justiss-Vance," *Find A Grave*, Memorial ID 211545288, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/211545288/valarie-omega-justiss-vance>. The *Find A Grave* entry mistakenly gives year of birth as 1931

(reversing the last two digits).

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