

Benn, Bernard Wilfred (1929–2014)

BRIAN W. BENN, AND SAMUEL LONDON

Brian W. Benn is the son of Dr. Bernard Wilfred Benn.

Samuel London, Ph.D., is a professor and chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama. He is the director of the Oakwood Office for the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists. London wrote the book *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010). Samuel and his wife Laura reside in Priceville, Alabama.

Bernard Wilfred Benn dedicated more than fifty years of his life to Christian education as a teacher, principal, professor, department chair, and college president.

Bernard was born in Georgetown, Guyana, on October 9, 1929, to Salathiel Benn and Dorcus Alberta Jones (1904–1995). He spent his formative years in Georgetown, though a significant amount of time was spent at the family property in the Pomeroon, Guyana. Bernard—or Wil, as he was affectionately known—grew up as a member of the Brethren Church, but was introduced to Seventh-day Adventism in his late teens at a tent meeting in Georgetown.¹

After completing his A levels, in the British system, and teaching for a few years in Georgetown, Bernard enrolled in Caribbean Union College (CUC), now the University of the Southern Caribbean, in the Maracas Valley of Trinidad and Tobago, to pursue a career in ministry. In the light of his advanced qualifications, the South Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventists asked him, while he was enrolled as a student at CUC, to teach secondary school. In 1956 and 1957 Benn taught at Southern Academy in San Fernando, Trinidad.² As his love for teaching grew, he decided to follow his passion and study education.



Bernard Wilfred Benn

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

To further his education, Benn enrolled at Atlantic Union College (AUC) in Lancaster, Massachusetts, where he majored in English. After completing his studies at AUC in 1959, Benn married Ursula Thilia Prime of San Fernando, Trinidad, West Indies, on June 21, 1959, at the Hanson Place church in Brooklyn, New York. Benn met Prime while teaching in her hometown of San Fernando, and this God-ordained meeting was nurtured through their constant communication while he was studying in the United States and she at the University of Toronto. This union would later produce three children: a daughter, Karen Paula Benn-Marshall; a son, Brian Wayne Benn; and a second daughter, Sonia Maria Benn-Ferdinand.³

Always a lover of learning, Benn, shortly after the marriage ceremony, attended Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, where he received his Master of Arts in English. Continuing, Benn enrolled at the Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, where he would obtain a professional diploma for teaching English in secondary schools and a doctorate in education.⁴

After graduating from Columbia University, Benn returned to Trinidad and Tobago, where from 1965 to 1968 he served as principal of Southern Academy in San Fernando.⁵ After a short stint in the United States, where he served as an associate professor of English at Alabama A&M University, he was called back to Trinidad and Tobago. From 1972 to 1977 Benn served as the president of CUC.⁶ Benn was regarded as a visionary—fostering relationships between CUC and the government of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as other sister schools of higher education abroad. These relationships and affiliations would pave the way for students desiring to further their education upon completing studies at CUC. Some students were subsequently offered scholarships as a result of these initiatives. Responding to Benn's request, the nation's prime minister, Eric Williams, began attending the college's graduation ceremonies. This burgeoning relationship between the college and the government helped to strengthen the school's reputation and proved beneficial to both entities.⁷

During his tenure at Caribbean Union College, Benn invited Calvin Rock, president of Oakwood College, to be the commencement speaker for the graduation ceremony. While visiting Trinidad and Tobago, Rock asked Benn to join the Oakwood College faculty. The family was very stable and settled in Trinidad, but after praying about it for some time, Benn and his wife decided to accept the invitation.⁸ Benn joined the faculty of the Department of English at Oakwood College in 1977.⁹ From 1977 to 1992 he served as the chair of the department, becoming one of the longest tenured chairs.¹⁰ He continued with the department as a full-time faculty member until his retirement in 2005.¹¹ On October 10, 2014, Bernard Wilfred Benn died in Memphis, Tennessee. He was 85 years old.

Benn is remembered as a mentor of both students and professors alike. While serving at Oakwood College, he shared his passion for literature and poetry beyond the classroom. He willingly served his community in several capacities, whether volunteering to moderate spelling bees and debates at the local universities or teaching Latin to small groups in his spare time.¹² Moreover, he was an editor and regular contributor to the *Collegiate Quarterly*. His legacy also includes more than forty years of dedicated service in the cause of Adventist education

as a teacher, principal, college president, and department chair.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Brian W. Benn, personal knowledge as the son of Bernard Wilfred Benn.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1956), 238. See also *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 244.
3. Brian W. Benn, personal knowledge.
4. "Bernard Wilfred Benn obituary," Oakwood University church, October 17, 2014.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1965–1966), 334. See also *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1967), 337; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968), 345.
6. Bernard W. Benn, "Voice in the Night." *World Mission Report* 64, no. 3 (1975): 29; "From Home Base to Front Line: North American Division." *ARH* 149, no. 41 (1972): 31. See also *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1972), 290; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1973–1974), 290; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1975), 295; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), 316; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 325.
7. "Bernard Wilfred Benn obituary."
8. Ibid.

9. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 378.
10. "Transitions: Oakwood College," *Southern Tidings* 86, no. 10 (1992): 16. See also *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979), 388; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 382; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981), 388; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 408; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983), 425; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), 427; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985), 441; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1986), 444; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987), 437; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988), 446; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1989), 409; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1990), 423; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991), 426; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1992), 421; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993), 405; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994), 416.
11. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1995), 422; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), 434; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997), 446; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 457; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1999), 465; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 469; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2001), 418; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 431; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2003), 462; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2004), 439; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2005), 458.
12. Brian W. Benn, personal knowledge.

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