

Colburn, Larry Roy (1938–2024)

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Larry Roy Colburn was a Seventh-day Adventist minister, publishing leader, missionary administrator, General Conference associate secretary, and administrative assistant to the General Conference president. Over more than four decades of denominational employment, he served in the United States, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Singapore. His most distinctive contribution arose from the combination of Mandarin-language preparation, publishing evangelism, Chinese mission administration, and later responsibility for international personnel and the church's work in Asia.¹

Early Life, Education, and Family

Larry Roy Colburn was born on August 26, 1938, in Muskegon, Michigan, United States, to Ernest Roy Colburn and Grace Louise Lutenberg Colburn. Raised in Saginaw, Michigan, in a Seventh-day Adventist family, he was baptized in 1950. He graduated from Cedar Lake Academy in 1956 and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in religion, with a minor in history, from Emmanuel Missionary College (renamed Andrews University in 1960) in 1961. He later undertook graduate study at Andrews University.²

On August 31, 1958, Colburn married Carole Jean Spalding in Ingham County, Michigan. Born March 28, 1939, in Lawrence, Michigan, Carole was the daughter of Adventist educator Ronald Wolcott Spalding and Helen Louise McElmurry Spalding. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from Emmanuel Missionary College in 1960 and taught in Adventist schools. The couple had three children: Lynne Janelle, Larry Rodney, and Lant Ronald, who was born in Taipei.³

During college Colburn worked as a literature evangelist in Saginaw and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. From 1961 to 1963 he served as assistant publishing secretary of the Michigan Conference, gaining experience that prepared him for overseas publishing ministry.⁴

Call and Preparation for Chinese Mission

In December 1960, the General Conference Publishing Department recommended Larry and Carole Colburn as prospective missionaries. No publishing appointment was immediately available, but they remained under consideration for overseas service.⁵

On March 12, 1963, the General Conference Committee invited Colburn to serve as publishing secretary of the [South China Island Union Mission](#) in the Far Eastern Division. Church leaders believed that he was young enough to master Chinese and grow into larger responsibility. Larry and Carole, with Lynne and Rodney, arrived in Taipei, Taiwan, on July 1, 1963.⁶

The South China Island Union included Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao and maintained a continuing interest in the Chinese mainland. Reflecting later on the call, Colburn wrote of the need to “let the roots go down among the Chinese people.” Language preparation was his first assignment: he and Carole enrolled in the Taipei Language Institute for full-time Mandarin study. He recalled, “The first three months of study were the toughest three months of my life!” Within a year he preached his first sermon in Chinese. Veteran missionary [E. L. Longway](#) also emphasized cultural adaptation rather than the simple transfer of Western procedures.⁷

Publishing and Administrative Service in Asia

After about ten months of language study, Colburn began visiting literature evangelists, recruiting workers, conducting sales and training seminars, and accompanying workers in the field. He also encouraged Taiwan Missionary College students to sell literature during vacations, helping them earn tuition while developing future Chinese publishing leaders.⁸

Colburn was ordained to the gospel ministry in Taiwan in 1966. By the late 1960s his responsibilities included public relations as well as publishing leadership, including publishing councils and training for literature evangelists.⁹

In 1970 Colburn reported the launch of a weekly half-hour Adventist television program in Taiwan. Chinese-dubbed films from [Faith for Today](#) and [It Is Written](#) were paired with invitations to enroll in a Bible correspondence course.¹⁰

In 1970 Colburn became publishing secretary of the [West Indonesia Union Mission](#), adapting to another language and culture. When he left Taiwan, union leaders noted his command of Chinese and his rapport with the people. He continued to hope for future service in China and expressed willingness to enter the mainland as a publishing leader if opportunity arose.¹¹

In 1973 Colburn returned to Taiwan as secretary of the South China Island Union Mission. During a 1974 furlough, the Far Eastern Division sponsored graduate study at Andrews University in preparation for continued mission service.¹²

In 1975 Colburn became president of the South China Island Union Mission, succeeding Doyle Barnett. His administration addressed declining college enrollment, limited staffing, consolidation of the two missions in Taiwan, and relocation of Taiwan Adventist College from Taipei to the Sun Moon Lake region. He also oversaw work in Hong Kong and Macao and maintained interest in reaching the Chinese mainland through education, publishing, radio, and personal witness.¹³

Return to North America and Renewed Far Eastern Service

The Colburns returned to North America in 1981 because their two oldest children were attending college in the United States. Their first period of overseas service ended on June 21, 1981, after nearly eighteen years.¹⁴

From 1981 to 1983 Colburn pastored the Sioux City district in the Iowa-Missouri Conference.¹⁵

In 1983 the Far Eastern Division called Colburn back as an administrative field secretary based in Singapore. Carole also served in the division office, including work in accounting and editorial coordination.¹⁶

As a division field secretary, Colburn participated in administration, committee work, personnel planning, and support for mission fields throughout East and Southeast Asia. His command of Mandarin and Indonesian strengthened his work across the region.¹⁷

General Conference Service

At the 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis, Indiana, Colburn was elected an associate secretary of the General Conference. As liaison for the Far Eastern Division, which then had more than half of the denomination's regular and short-term missionaries, he helped recruit and appoint personnel and advised missionaries and division leaders.¹⁸

After Don A. Roth's retirement in 1990, Colburn became the Secretariat officer most closely associated with Adventist Volunteer Service and regularly presented volunteer appointments. He also reported on Global Mission priorities in the Far East, emphasizing that workers for difficult fields needed both academic preparation and practical skills.¹⁹

He also served in editorial and committee roles at General Conference Sessions and Annual Councils.²⁰

Around 2000 Colburn became administrative assistant to the General Conference president, with particular responsibility for the [Northern Asia-Pacific](#) and [Southern Asia-Pacific divisions](#) and for major committee meetings at Spring Meeting and Annual Council.²¹

Colburn retired on July 24, 2003, after approximately forty-two years of denominational employment.²²

Later Years and Legacy

In retirement the Colburns lived in eastern Tennessee and remained active in the Newport Seventh-day Adventist Church. Colburn also wrote “Serving on the Edge of the Middle Kingdom—A Great Privilege,” a retrospective account of his service in Taiwan and his continuing concern for the work in China.²³

Colburn died on September 21, 2024. A family memorial service was held at the Newport Seventh-day Adventist Church in Newport, Tennessee, on Sabbath, October 12, 2024.²⁴

Colburn's career linked Chinese-language publishing, union administration, and General Conference personnel service. In Taiwan he helped train literature evangelists and relocate Taiwan Adventist College; at the General Conference he applied decades of field experience to missionary appointments and relations with the church's Asian divisions.²⁵

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NOTES

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