

# Roberts, Vincent Lorain (1913–1996)

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## 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.

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Vincent L. Roberts, pastor and administrator, was the first African American executive officer of a union conference in the North American Division, serving as treasurer of the Southwestern Union. Prior to that he was the first secretary-treasurer of the Southwest Region Conference and subsequently the conference's president for 13 years.

## Early Years

Born in Brunswick, Georgia, on April 26, 1913, to Andrew and Bertha Roberts, Vincent was three years old when the family moved to Jacksonville, Florida. His mother was an Adventist who desired that Vincent receive a Christian education and thus home-schooled him for the first four years. He then attended an Adventist elementary school until the eighth grade.<sup>1</sup>

Vincent wanted to attend Oakwood Academy in Huntsville, Alabama, but lacked the funds, so instead attended Stanton College Preparatory High School, a renowned public school in Jacksonville. He went on to study at Florida Baptist College and then at Walker Business College in Jacksonville where he made such a favorable impression on the school president that he was invited to join the faculty after graduating.<sup>2</sup> Along with his teaching position, Roberts drove a taxi at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville and sold insurance.<sup>3</sup>

On June 4, 1936, Vincent married Josephine Still Jones (1904-1986), a public school teacher whom he first met when she was his ninth grade science teacher at Stanton High. Along with her daughter from a previous marriage, JoAnne Mabury (Logan), born October 6, 1927, Josephine and Vincent had a daughter, Verna Roberts



Vincent L. Roberts

Photo courtesy of Verna Roberts Cason.

(Cason), born July 13, 1939.<sup>4</sup>

Roberts was inspired by Elders Walter W. Fordham and Harold D. Singleton to study for the ministry at Oakwood College (now University). After completing the theology program in July 1944, the young Pastor Roberts assisted W. W. Fordham in a large tent effort in Tampa, Florida, where the attendance exceeded 1,000 on Sunday nights.<sup>5</sup> Roberts then remained in Florida where his first ministerial assignments were in St. Augustine, Daytona, New Smyrna, West Palm Beach, Fort Pierce, Belle Glade and Delray Beach.

## Southwest Region Conference Leadership

On December 16, 1946, Roberts was elected secretary-treasurer of the newly-organized Southwestern Mission, headquartered in Dallas, Texas.<sup>6</sup> The new entity came about after the General Conference approved formation of Black-administered or colored conferences (as they were called then) in 1944. Five such conferences were created by the end of 1945, but the colored constituency of the Southwestern Union Conference (covering Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) was initially organized as a “mission”—for most practical purposes comparable to a conference but officially under the direct administrative authority of the Southwestern Union Conference. In 1950, after dramatic membership growth of more than 30 percent in three years (from 1,584 at the end of 1946 to 2,081 at the end of 1949) and corresponding financial advances, the Southwestern Mission became a fully-fledged conference, the Southwest Region Conference, on January 17, 1950. Despite the economically repressive conditions of a large portion of the constituency, tithe receipts similarly increased from just under \$71,000 in 1947 to nearly \$90,000 in 1949.<sup>7</sup>

Roberts was re-elected as secretary-treasurer at the January 1950 constituency session but later that year accepted a call to serve in the same position in the Northeastern Conference, headquartered in New York City. He returned to the Southwest Region Conference in 1956 as president and continued in that office through 1969.<sup>8</sup>

As president, Roberts promoted both public evangelism and literature evangelism, resulting in a great increase in membership and church buildings. Property for the Southwest Region Academy and the Southwest Region Conference office were purchased while he was in office (although new buildings have since been secured).

## Southwestern Union Financial Leadership

In November 1969, Roberts was called to serve as associate secretary of the Southwestern Union Conference, with the added responsibility of heading the Sabbath School department.<sup>9</sup> Then, in 1971 he became the treasurer for the Southwestern Union and as such the first African American to serve as an executive officer of a union conference.<sup>10</sup> In that capacity, his input and financial planning were crucial in the development of Huguley Memorial Hospital and a new Southwestern Union office building. Another highlight of his varied contributions

while serving as union treasurer was conducting evangelistic crusades in Kenya and Egypt during the early 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

After retiring from full-time ministry in 1980, Roberts continued serving by accepting the responsibility of chairing the Committee of 100, made up of major donors to Southwestern Adventist University. He also remained on the university's board of trustees and ended up becoming the longest-serving trustee in the school's history (1956-1996).<sup>12</sup> After his wife Josephine died in January 1986, Roberts donated a memorial gift to the university in her honor that financed establishment of the Josephine J. Roberts Recording Studio!<sup>13</sup>

## Final Years

On May 3, 1987, Elder Roberts married Alga Bland (1907-1996), widow of Frank L. Bland, who had been a General Conference vice president. They lived in Keene, Texas, until March 7, 1996, when Vincent L. Roberts died at age 83.<sup>14</sup> Alga Roberts died a few months later on August 11, 1996, at age 89.<sup>15</sup> Both are buried in Keene Memorial Cemetery. The couple designated a portion of their trust to a scholarship fund to aid students at Southwestern Adventist University.<sup>16</sup>

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### NOTES

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3. Roberts Memorial program.
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