



## The George Brown Story and Adventist Race Relations | BY BENJAMIN BAKER

Race relations in Adventism are a turbulent and often-ignored subject. More than sixty years have elapsed since the creation of regional conferences for the African American members, and the conferences endure although the surrounding culture has changed. What many Adventists may not know or remember, however, is that a black man was nominated to the presidency of the General Conference. The year was 1990, the place Indianapolis, Indiana. The Church was engrossed in debates over woman's ordination, tithe appropriations, leadership, and conference structure.

### The Nominating Dilemma

Neal Wilson, the incumbent General Conference president, had held the post for twelve years and chose to submit his name for nomination once again. Wilson was highly respected by the constituents, and the Church had made significant progress under his leadership. After the nominating committee took several ballots, two candidates emerged as frontrunners: Neal C. Wilson and George W. Brown.

George Brown was born on January 11, 1924, in the Dominican Republic to an Antiguan father and Dominican mother. His native language was Spanish and he was a third-generation Adventist. Brown earned his bachelor's degree in theology from Caribbean Union College in 1948 and served successfully as a pastor and evangelist for a decade. He married Carla Brown in 1952, and the couple had four daughters. He received his master's degree in systematic theology and doctor of divinity degree from Andrews University. Brown held

numerous positions in the Inter-American Division, including the presidency of Caribbean Union College.

In 1980, Brown assumed the presidency of the Inter-American Division. For a decade, he provided extraordinary leadership, at once conservative and progressive. The division experienced unprecedented growth. He was known for his adroitness at reconciliation and unification.

The Nominating Committee had a decision to make, and the delegation voted decisively for Brown, 130 to 81.

### Time for a Decision

A messenger was dispatched to find Brown. The 211 voting delegates were asked to stay in the room so that the choice would not be broadcast before Brown was notified. It took some time to find the nominee. The chair, Robert Folkenberg, then president of the Carolina Conference, and secretary, Benjamin Reaves, then president of Oakwood College, broke the news to Brown and urged him to accept. The sixty-six-year-old Brown was surprised. He asked for a day to think it over and promised to have an answer on Friday by 5:00 p.m.

Brown and his family went to a private place to talk the matter over. Brown describes this as "the most excruciating experience I have ever had." He was honored that the Church thought him the man to lead it, but he had serious issues to consider. He was nearing seventy years in age. His beloved wife of almost forty years was

ill. If he accepted the presidency, he would have to travel a great deal of the time, which meant that he would be away from his wife. Brown was in prayer and deep thought for much of the night and morning. Pressure came from all sides for him to accept.

### The Breakthrough

During that gauntlet of a day of prayer and thought, Brown reached the conclusion that God was not leading him to accept the presidency. When he realized this, he recalls that a peace came over him and he could not be moved by any arguments or suggestions to the contrary. Brown announced his declension to the committee before 5:00 p.m. on Friday, as he had promised. Robert Folkenberg told the nominating committee: "A nightmare of nightmares has occurred. Elder Brown has decided not to accept."

The committee then selected Folkenberg for the presidency, but that is another story.

Although this critical episode has been largely forgotten, it is important to keep in mind that the Seventh-day Adventist Church nominated a black man to be the president of the world church eighteen years before the United States seriously approached the possibility. That 1990 General Conference Session was a breakthrough in race relations in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ■

**Benjamin J. Baker** is pursuing a Ph.D. from Howard University in Washington, D.C.