

Charles M. Kinney— Founder of Black Adventism

The church owes a great debt
to this remarkable man, who was ordained
in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1889.

By RON GRAYBILL

THE PRE-EMINENT FIGURE among black Adventists in the early 1880's, to the time when Edson White reached Vicksburg in 1895, was Charles M. Kinney. Most of what Adventists learned about the progress of the church among blacks during these years they learned from Kinney's regular articles in the REVIEW.

Church leaders looked to him to develop the best methods of evangelizing black Americans with the Advent message. When Kinney wrote to D. T. Jones, the General Conference secretary, asking whether he should concentrate on preaching, Bible readings, or colporteur work, Elder Jones gave him a free hand to experiment and determine for himself what the best methods would be: "Your success or failure," he wrote, "will largely shape the policy of the General Conference in planning for the work among the colored people in the future."¹

But let us go back in our story. Charles M. Kinney was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia, in 1855. He was ten years old at the end of the Civil War, and as a young man he worked his way west to the rough and ready town of Reno, Nevada.²

It was there, in 1878, that he attended a series of evangelistic lectures by J. N. Loughborough. During these lectures Ellen G. White visited Reno, and on Tuesday evening, July 30, she preached to Loughborough's crowd of 400 on the words of John: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God."³

C. M. Kinney never forgot that ser-

mon. He felt the love of God, accepted the truths about the Sabbath and the Second Advent, and kept the last Sabbath of September 1878. One of the seven charter members of the Reno church, he was elected church clerk and secretary of the Nevada Tract and Missionary Society.

We have no clues as to how Kinney had been educated up to this time, but it is surprising that a young man of 23 would immediately be thrust into this responsible position. The choice proved a good one. Kinney was a meticulous record keeper and statistician. He was a clear writer and a zealous advocate of his new-found faith.

He saw to it that a complete collection of Adventist books and periodicals was placed in the Reform Club Public Library of Reno and in the Reno Temperance Reform Club. He immediately took up correspondence with old Baptist friends in Virginia, sending them the *Signs of the Times* and other literature. Kinney was doubtless responsible for some of the earliest black converts in Virginia. He wrote quarterly reports for the REVIEW AND HERALD, telling of the progress of the Nevada Tract and Missionary Society.⁴

So promising was Kinney's work that local church members in Reno, together with the California Conference, sent him to Healdsburg College, in California, from 1883 to 1885 for further education.⁵ Mrs. White was living in Healdsburg at this time, and he must often have heard her speak during his college years.

In 1885 the California Conference sent him to Topeka, Kansas, to begin work among the black people there. He started his work on the first of June, and by mid-October had canvassed a third of the town

with Adventist books and tracts. He gave Bible studies, as well, and before long had succeeded in making three converts and in stirring up the ire of a black Baptist minister in the town.

This minister, of course, soon preached a sermon against Adventism. Kinney was present, and at the close of the discourse he asked the privilege of reviewing the sermon in the same church. Refused, he advertised a meeting in the park the following Sunday. There he demolished the Baptist's anti-Sabbath arguments, and when the Baptist preacher tried to debate him, he reminded the fellow that he had only promised to review the subject, not to debate it.⁶

Kinney continued to work in Kansas throughout 1886 and 1887, focusing primarily on Topeka and Emporia. He spent his mornings canvassing, selling primarily the *Marvel of Nations*, by Uriah Smith. Then in the afternoon he gave Bible studies. More than once he held evangelistic meetings, and through his labors won about two dozen converts. The work was slow and difficult because he was calling people to leave their well-established Baptist and Methodist churches and to tear themselves away from the whole social matrix that bound the black community together.⁷

First Contact With Race Prejudice

During 1888 Kinney seems to have concentrated more on canvassing and less on other phases of evangelistic work. But early in 1889 we find him in St. Louis, Missouri, working among the black believers there.⁸ The church in St. Louis had been organized two years earlier and by 1889 numbered more than 50.⁹ Many, if not the majority, of the members were white, but there was a growing interest among blacks, especially after Kinney's arrival.

It was here, in St. Louis, that Kinney apparently made his first contact with race prejudice in the Adventist church. He wrote nothing about his experience in St. Louis for the REVIEW, and his letters for 1889 have been lost, but we do have the letters written to him by D. T. Jones, the General Conference secretary at that time. In Jones's letters we have fairly good evidence that Kinney was strongly protesting the prejudice he faced in St. Louis. Jones did what he could to encourage his colleague.

He wrote: "I feel glad, Bro. Kinney, that you are doing something for the colored people in St. Louis, and I shall feel sorry to have you leave

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there before you have finished your work. I have always felt deeply for the colored people, knowing that even now they labor under many disadvantages. I have a sympathy for the race and have always had. I early imbibed the abolitionist sentiments, though I was not old enough to go into the war. I now want to see the race rise to an equal position with others in this nation. But the only way it can be accomplished is by education and refinement. The members of the white race who neglect these sink down to a lower level. . . . I wish you the best of success in your efforts to help your people. You are doing a noble work."¹⁰

Kinny's encounter with race prejudice in the St. Louis church is particularly interesting because Mrs. White visited the city shortly after he left, and she too observed the problem. In 1891, in her appeal to the General Conference Committee for a more aggressive work among black people, she recalled her experience in St. Louis:

"While at St. Louis a year ago," she told the church leaders, "as I knelt in prayer, these words were presented to me as if written with a pen of fire: 'All ye are brethren.' The Spirit of God rested upon me in a wonderful manner, and matters were opened to me in regard to the church at St. Louis and in other places. The spirit and words of some in regard to members of the church were an offense to God. They were closing the door of their hearts to Jesus. Among those in St. Louis who believe the truth there are colored people who are true and faithful, precious in the sight of the God of heaven, and they should have just as much respect as any of God's children. Those who have spoken harshly to them or have despised them have despised the purchase of the blood of Christ, and they need the transforming grace of Christ in their own hearts, that they may have the pitying tenderness of Jesus toward those who love God with all the fervor of which they themselves are capable. The color of the skin does not determine character in the heavenly courts."¹¹

In the spring of 1889, arrangements were made for Kinny to go to Louisville, Kentucky, to take up the work begun there by A. Barry, a former Baptist minister. T. B. Buckner was in St. Louis and was developing rapidly under Kinny's directions. He would stand by the company of black believers after Kinny left St. Louis.

From Louisville Kinny continued to report his work to the General

Conference and to write for guidance on various matters of church discipline and church standards. He asked whether it was permissible to take a bath on Sabbath, whether it was proper for Adventists to play music for hire in Sundaykeeping churches, and what one who keeps a boardinghouse should do on Sabbath.¹² He found and improved opportunities to speak in the local Methodist church.¹³

Calls for black workers were increasing by now, but A. Barry had been sent to Canada, leaving Kinny as virtually the only black Adventist minister in the United States.¹⁴



C. M. Kinny



Kinny's Louisville work represents his coming of age as a pastor-evangelist. On October 5, 1889, he was ordained the first black Seventh-day Adventist minister.¹⁵ On February 16, 1890, the Louisville Seventh-day Adventist church was organized, the second black Seventh-day Adventist church in the world.¹⁶ In August of that year Kinny went to work with the first black SDA church, at Edgefield Junction, Tennessee. This church had been organized seven years earlier, in 1883, and Harry Lowe, a local member, had been granted a ministerial license to watch over the little group.

From Kinny's letters during this time emerges a picture of a lonely but dedicated pastor, moving from place to place in Kentucky and Tennessee, encouraging a family here,

preaching in a courthouse there, debating with a Methodist minister somewhere else. Kinny labored directly under the General Conference and sent a weekly letter to the General Conference secretary, reporting his movements and work.

In November, 1890, we find him in Nebo, Kentucky. The local Methodist pastor had been kind enough to lend him the use of his church, but when the former pastor, a Reverend Collins, appeared on the scene, things changed quickly. Kinny reports that he "kicked up a stir, preached twice on Sunday—morning and evening—against the 'Advents' and the writer. His attacks on us were very unprincipled. . . ."

"At night I went to hear him, intending to call on him to prove his base insinuations if he had personally repeated them, but he did not do it. But he paid his respects to Elder Uriah Smith, stating that he had killed his mother, cut out her heart and boiled it in a pot, for which he was sent to the penitentiary."¹⁷

A little later, from Fulton, Kentucky, Kinny wrote a letter including an outline of one of his sermons. "Subject: 'What must I do to be saved?' Answer: 1. Faith, 2. Repentance, 3. Baptism, 4. Keeping the Commandments, 5. Growing in the knowledge and light of truth, accepting and walking in the light when given, and 6. Endurance and perseverance to the end.

"The minister was present," Kinny reported, "and said there was nothing that he had heard that he could not accept. But the 4th and 5th conditions when fully explained, which will be the theme of my further efforts here, I am afraid will not be so readily accepted."¹⁸

Kinny did not complain of loneliness, but certainly his work was lonely and often discouraging. He was unmarried at this time, and his labors often extremely difficult. He wrote to the General Conference secretary, saying:

"I do not feel discouraged, only in this: that much hard work is being done with very small immediate results and this leads me to fear that the General Conference may get discouraged before I do. But if the General Conference does not get discouraged, I believe that the Lord will yet bless the efforts that are being made. So, then, when I hear from you and read your words of encouragement it is the cause of joy and gratitude."¹⁹

On Christmas Day, 1890, we find him writing again, this time to the REVIEW AND HERALD, begging the

editor to publish an appeal to help build church buildings for two of his congregations.

"The church of about 20 members in Edgefield Junction, Tennessee, and the church in Louisville, Kentucky, of 14 members, not including children, both need a church building in which to worship. Neither are able to build one without assistance from friends of the cause.

"The Edgefield church has taken steps in this direction. One of the brethren has purchased two lots to be all paid for by the first of May. The church is then to purchase from him enough to build on. The church lot will cost forty dollars. Pledges on the lot and church have been made to the amount of seventy dollars and fifty cents. Size of the church 34 x 22, twelve feet high from floor to ceiling, ceiled inside, weather boarded outside, shingle roofed, 7 windows, double door in front, stone foundation. The estimated cost when furnished will be \$250. On the whole, lot and church about \$300. . . . The Edgefield church expects to use their building for a school also."²⁰

Kinny's request was turned down. The REVIEW never published appeals for local churches, and the vision of the General Conference leaders at that time was too short to see that any exception should be made. But although Kinny's written request lay buried in the General Conference files, his prayers were being heard, as events would soon show.

In Kinny's work, he always emphasized the importance of good literature, and as he went from place to place he sold *The Great Controversy* and continued to sell it even when D. T. Jones urged him to switch to *Bible Readings*, which would be more lucrative. He took pride in the good work done by *The Great Controversy* and reported to Jones: "When I left [Fulton, Kentucky] I promised them a copy of *The Great Controversy*, which I sent December 17. They write that they all take it, that Bro. Caldwell had read two thirds of it already and his mind was all clear now on present truth. One of his daughters, the writer of the letters, says, 'I am thankful that the Lord has given us light through the Spirit of Prophecy, and I shall try to obey all its teachings.'"²¹

An Appeal and a Response

The General Conference of 1891 was about to begin. Kinny was invited to attend. In preparation, he wrote a report and an appeal to the General Conference. Across the top of the page are penned a few notes,

as if they represented the introductory thoughts of a speech. "Gratitude for what has been done, statistics not known," Kinny wrote, "Difficulties—stigma, reproach, race prejudice," and then he added the pointed question: "Is it time?"

This question was followed by two Scripture references: Psalm 69:9. "For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproach thee are fallen upon me." What was Kinny planning to ask? Is it time for white Adventists to stand by black Adventists and declare that a reproach to one is a reproach to all? Is it time?

The next text was Ezekiel 22:30. I will begin with the 29th verse to make the context clear. "The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully. And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it."

Is it time, Kinny must have been asking, for a man among Seventh-day Adventist leaders to begin to reverse the centuries of oppression, robbery, and neglect?

The strange thing is that someone, either Kinny or someone at the General Conference, crossed out those notes and those texts. But God had an answer. If there was no man ready to make a hedge, ready to stand in the gap and defend the defenseless, there was a woman. And that woman, Ellen G. White, made her historic appeal "Our Duty to the Colored People" at the 1891 General Conference.

"I know that that which I now speak will bring me into conflict," she said. "This I do not covet, for the conflict has seemed to be continuous of late years; but I do not mean to live a coward or die a coward, leaving my work undone. I must follow in my Master's footsteps. It has become fashionable to look down upon the poor, and upon the colored race in particular. But Jesus, the Master, was poor, and He sympathized with the poor, the discarded, the oppressed, and declares that every insult shown to them is as if shown to Himself."²²

The response on the part of the white church at first was slow. But Kinny's work seemed to blossom after this conference. On June 13, 1891, he organized the third black SDA church, in Bowling Green, Kentucky.²³ A year later, after nine months of work in New Orleans, he organized the fourth black SDA

church there.²⁴ Two years later, on September 15 and 16, 1894, he organized the fifth church among black Seventh-day Adventists, in Nashville, Tennessee.²⁵

In his appeal to the General Conference in 1891, Kinny had outlined the steps he thought necessary to bring success to the work among black people. One of his suggestions was the following: "I earnestly pray that the time is not far in the future when the Conference shall delegate a white laborer to the work among this people, giving his whole time to this people in taking the truth to them and building up the various branches among them, developing native talents, educating and getting them into the work."²⁶

By 1894, this prayer was being answered. As the Nashville church was being organized by C. M. Kinny, a riverboat loaded with white Adventists was heading down the Mississippi for Vicksburg. Edson White was captain, and for the next half-dozen years he would come to be spokesman for the work among black people, doing exactly what Kinny had suggested, giving his whole time to them, building up the various branches, developing native talents, educating them, and getting them into the work.²⁷

Meanwhile, Kinny was not inactive. He continued in the ministry until 1911, when, because of his wife's illness, he retired. He lived to the age of 96, dying August 3, 1951, at the Riverside Sanitarium in Nashville, Tennessee.

Perhaps there were other black ministers who, in better times, made more converts than C. M. Kinny, but no one faced the lonely task he faced. He can unquestionably be honored today as the founder of black Adventism. □

REFERENCES

- ¹ D. T. Jones to C. M. Kinny, June 26, 1889.
- ² See obituary, *Review and Herald*, Sept. 27, 1951.
- ³ *Review and Herald*, Feb. 6, 1930; *Signs of the Times*, Aug. 8, 1878.
- ⁴ *Review and Herald*, May 3, 1881; July 19, 1881; Oct. 18, 1881.
- ⁵ *Review and Herald*, Feb. 6, 1930.
- ⁶ *Review and Herald*, Oct. 27, 1885.
- ⁷ *Review and Herald*, Sept. 6, 1887; Nov. 15, 1887.
- ⁸ *Review and Herald*, Jan. 29, 1889.
- ⁹ *Review and Herald*, May 29, 1888.
- ¹⁰ D. T. Jones to C. M. Kinny, March 6, 1889.
- ¹¹ *Southern Work*, p. 11.
- ¹² D. T. Jones, Sept. 9, 1889.
- ¹³ D. T. Jones, Sept. 11, 1889.
- ¹⁴ D. T. Jones, March 31, 1889.
- ¹⁵ *Review and Herald*, Oct. 29, 1889.
- ¹⁶ *Review and Herald*, Aug. 26, 1890.
- ¹⁷ C. M. Kinny to D. T. Jones, Nov. 3, 1890.
- ¹⁸ C. M. Kinny to D. T. Jones, Nov. 17, 1890.
- ¹⁹ C. M. Kinny to D. T. Jones, Nov. 24, 1890.
- ²⁰ C. M. Kinny to *Review and Herald*, Dec. 25, 1890.
- ²¹ C. M. Kinny to D. T. Jones, Jan. 6, 1891.
- ²² *Southern Work*, pp. 10, 11.
- ²³ *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1891.
- ²⁴ Organized, June 4, 1892; see *Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892.
- ²⁵ *Review and Herald*, Oct. 9, 1894.
- ²⁶ C. M. Kinny, Feb. 17, 1891.
- ²⁷ The Edson White story is told in the author's book *Mission to Black America*.