

Guyana

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Guyana (formerly British Guiana) is a country on the northern coastline of South America bordering the Atlantic Ocean. It can be divided into five geographic regions: a marshy, low, coastal plain along the Atlantic coast; a white, hilly sand and clay inland region; the rainy Forested Highland Region; the drier savannah areas in the southwest; and the interior savannah full of mountains.¹

People of Guyana

The population of Guyana is diverse. Most of it is concentrated along the coast and consists of heterogeneous descendants of sugarcane laborers, but the interior of Guyana is largely home to Indians. The official language is English, but a creole patois is spoken throughout the country. A 2012 census of 780,000 people indicated that Indigenous groups made up 10.5 percent; Indian, 39.8; African, 29.3; Mixed, 19.9; and Other (Chinese, Portuguese, White), 0.5. In the same census, the dispersion of religious affiliation was: Christianity, 65.3 percent; Hinduism, 24.8; Islam, 6.8; Unaffiliated, 3.1.²

History and Economy

Wars between the Dutch, British, and French resulted in regular changes in governance of the territories that now constitute Guyana throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Peace treaties after each conflict determined which nation would rule the colonies in the area. These colonists used West African slaves as a source of labor to develop the business projects of their citizens, who occupied different sections of colonized territories. They generally displaced and marginalized the indigenous peoples that lived in the areas the colonists desired for business activities.

Thousands of imported African slaves were used to dig hundreds of miles of deep canals to drain the marshes of the coastal region and establish arable land. When estates were established, the slaves provided labor for agricultural pursuits, eventually focusing on the most profitable – growing sugarcane to produce and export sugar and its byproducts.³ Sugarcane farming remained dominant in Guyana's economy until recently. Mining sources were developed when bauxite was discovered in the hilly sandy region and gold, diamonds, and manganese were found in the mountainous forested region.

When slavery was abolished, the colonists replaced slave labor with tens of thousands of indentured servants, primarily from their colonies in other parts of the world. The majority was recruited from India, and a smaller number was recruited from Europe and China.

Origins of Seventh-day Adventism in Guyana

The International Tract and Missionary Society (ITMS) is cited as the primary source of contact between British Guiana and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1883-1885. Early records of tract society activity are based on oral sources that are difficult to trace. One account is about tracts that were left on a wharf in Georgetown, the capital city, by a ship's captain in fulfillment of a request from W. J. Boynton of the New York ITMS. Reading of a tract reportedly led a woman named Alberta Alleyne to observe Saturday as the Sabbath. Another involves a request to an annual meeting of ITMS in Battle Creek, Michigan, in November 1885 by British Guianese R. L. Jeffrey, seeking help for over 20 people worshipping on the Sabbath day. Another ITMS related contact reported a visit by Thomas E. Amsterdam, a colporteur from Boston, Massachusetts, who was sent to British Guiana in 1886, where he organized the South American Tract Society with branches in Berbice and Demerara. Still another reported a stopover by L. C. Chadwick, president of the New York ITMS, in 1892 as a part of a Caribbean tour, during which he baptized people in Georgetown. He also baptized people in a town 80 miles up the Demerara River, probably Bootooba.⁴

On November 24, 1886, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists voted to send G. G. Rupert to British Guiana.⁵ He arrived in Georgetown on January 31, 1887, and wrote about his arrival and first impressions of the country. He also reported that, "Through our visiting families, some good souls have become deeply interested, and have stated their intention to obey the truth."⁶

In 1893, Warren George Kneeland, who was licensed to preach by Battle Creek College in 1890 and ordained in 1893, was sent to British Guiana with his wife, Mary, and worked to spread the message for three years.⁷ His reports during those years indicate that he lived in Georgetown but was also responsible for work in Dutch Guiana, having five members added by baptism.⁸ In 1895, Pastor Kneeland visited Robert Fleming's home at the invitation of his daughter, Louise, baptized six members of the Fleming family, and organized a church in July 1895.⁹ The Flemings are descendants of Scots who established businesses up the Demerara River. Some Flemings still live in Bootooba and other parts of Guyana and continue to be influential members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Missions Among Indigenous Peoples

The indigenous groups that are said to have been the first inhabitants of Guyana include the Akawaios, Arawaks, Arecunas, Caribs, Macushis, Patomonas, Wai Wais, Wapishanas, and Warraus peoples.¹⁰ Christian denominations who visited British Guiana in the late 1880s wanted to establish missions in territories where

indigenous people lived. Missions usually operated a church and a school but could not own land. The Seventh-day Adventist Church followed this model. The first Adventist mission was located in Bethany in 1896-1897. Pastor Kneeland pioneered work among the indigenous people in that area.¹¹ The earliest documentation of land use rights of Guyana Conference was a grant of land dated July 17, 1908.

An attempt to establish a mission for the indigenous peoples who lived near Mount Roraima is a part of Seventh-day Adventist missionary stories in Guyana. Mount Roraima is a table top mountain that rises 2,810 meters, or 9,220 feet, above sea level. It borders Guyana, Venezuela, and Brazil.¹² Ovid E. Davis, the missionary president of the field, made two attempts to reach the people living there in 1910 and 1911. A bout of malaria caused him to abandon the first attempt. He reached the area on the second attempt but died of “blackwater fever” and was buried there.¹³

In 1927, A. W. Cott and his wife, Elizabeth, established Mount Roraima Indian Mission. The mission was separate from Guiana Conference, which included British, Dutch, and French Guiana.¹⁴ Several other missions were established in different parts of the country. They are no longer designated as missions but function as congregations within Guyana Conference.

Education and Medical Work

For decades in the 20th Century, the missions operated elementary schools in Bethany, Bootooba, Kaikhan, Paruima, and Waramadong. The Seventh-day Adventist Church also operated elementary schools in Bara Cara, Kimbia, and Wismar as well as elementary and secondary schools in Georgetown. These schools positively impacted these communities. Some of their students became distinguished employees of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Guyana community, and international settings. In 1976, the Guyana government took control of the church schools.¹⁵

“In 1908 R. N. Graves, a national of British Guiana, returned home with a British medical diploma and practiced for some time. After an interval the [medical] work was reestablished in 1952. E. C. Duerksen, a physician, arrived in 1954 to take charge of the medical work, and was joined in 1955 by Oliver J. Pogue, also a physician.”¹⁶ In 1967, Davis Memorial Hospital, a newly constructed 40-bed facility, was established in Georgetown.¹⁷

From the inception of medical ministry activity, and for four years after colonial rule ended in 1966, the physician staff supervising the work were missionaries sent from the United States of America who worked for an average of 12 years each, sometimes in tandem. The first three missionary medical directors were Doctors E. C. Duerksen, O. E. Pogue, and H. N. Gates. Medical ministry achieved prestige in the country because it was operated efficiently and because much of its clientele came from colonial and other wealthy sections of the local population. It was also significantly subsidized through the missionary policies of Seventh-day Adventists.

Much of the financial surplus was used to provide health care for poorer people in the country at low prices. In the early 1970s, the flow of long-serving missionary physicians with established practices ended, becoming a steady trickle of relief doctors, and the subsidies declined. The hospital was not prepared for this turn of events with the rise of new private hospitals in the city. Its fortunes waned, and it has not regained its former prominence in Guyanese society. The hospital is currently supervised by Caribbean Union Conference.

Training Local Workers and Church Growth

In the first 70 years of Seventh-day Adventism in British Guiana, responsibility for the spread of the message was assigned to missionaries sent from North America. A British Guianese convert, Phillip L. Giddings, enrolled at Battle Creek College, graduated in 1895, and returned to British Guiana.¹⁸ He pastored in Berbice and directed the construction of a church in New Amsterdam. Later, he worked in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti.¹⁹

On February 8, 1895, Seventh-day Adventist Church membership in the colony was 35. "Of these, seven reside in Berbice, five on Troolie Island, Essequibo River, and five, eight miles in the interior on the Demerara River." W. G. Kneeland did not mention the other 17 in this report, but it may be reasonably inferred that they were in Georgetown, where he arrived, settled, and was "able to repair our chapel, so that we now have a respectable place of worship."²⁰ (Trolley Island is on the Essequibo River close to where the Supenaam river flows into it and a few miles by river from Bethany.) Those in Berbice were most likely in New Amsterdam, where the British Guianese "licentiate," Pastor Phillip L. Giddings, began his ministry in 1895 and led the construction of a church. Eight miles up the Demerara River would not have been considered "interior" at any time in the history of the country, so that may be a typographical error and may have been "80," which would be in the interior, and in the Bootooba area, where Pastor Kneeland had met and baptized members of the Fleming family in 1895. The locations of the 35 members suggest that they would have consisted mostly of ethnic Africans, Mixed, and Indigenous people in that order. That pattern has continued to the present.

The second oldest documentation of land rights in the Guyana Conference office is dated May 8, 1909, for land in New Amsterdam. The next documentation was dated June 24, 1915, for land in Buxton. The next series of documented land rights is dated in the 1930s, the busiest decade in the period prior to 1950. Purchases, leases, and land grants at Bootooba, Kimbia, Adelphi, Georgetown (Central), Bartica, Queenstown (Essequibo), Belladrum, and Charity followed in that order. The land acquisition shows that activity was already well dispersed in the three counties of the country during the time when missionaries administered the church in Guyana.

In 1927, in an effort to train the church's workers, the Adventist Church established East Caribbean Training School in Trinidad. Two years later, this school was renamed Caribbean Training College and, in 1947, was officially declared a junior college. In 1956, it was renamed Caribbean Union College.²¹ Through the years, the school prepared a steady flow of local workers to expand the church and spread the gospel in the region. This

facilitated the transition of the administration to local leadership.

Different configurations of the Caribbean fields saw British, Dutch, and French Guiana grouped together as one unit from 1924 until 1945, when they were designated as separate fields. In 1926, William H. Lewis, a native Guyanese, was elected president of East Caribbean Mission.²²

As the British gave up colonial rule of territories starting in the middle of the 20th Century, local Adventist ministers were placed in control of church administration. Wallace William Weithers became the first native Guyanese to be appointed president of Guyana Mission in 1971. His leadership was preceded by that of ministers from Jamaica and Barbados. When Guyana Mission became a self-supporting conference in 1976, Roy I. McGarrell became its elected president with an administrative staff composed entirely of native Guyanese.

One interesting fact about the administration of the treasury of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Guyana since 1971 is that women have been treasurers as frequently as men. The late Marjorie Thompson, Margaret Ramsaran, the late Ruby Alleyne (nee Ennis), and, more recently, Rovenia Harrinauth have filled the position. Church congregations and membership increased greatly in the closing decades of the 20th Century and has continued in the 21st Century.

The work of native people trained at Caribbean Union College made the church grow among the indigenous population. The first of these native trained workers were Pastors Sebastian Edmund and Lloyd Henrito, who worked the western regions of Essequibo along the Kako, Kamarang, and Mazaruni Rivers. Pastor Lindon Gudge, an indigenous worker from Bethany on the Supenaam River, served as president of Guyana Conference and Suriname Mission.

Native Guyanese effectively administered the field, spreading the Adventist message and building upon the foundation laid by prior missionaries. As of 2019, Guyana had 170 Adventist churches, 65,160 members, and a total population of 783,000.²³

Influence of the Laity on Growth of Adventism

In Guyana, Seventh-day Adventist Church pastors are assigned to groups of churches designated as districts because of limitations in financial resources and the increasing rate of congregations. Church members do not expect to be ministered to by a pastor daily or weekly. Regardless of their age or gender, experienced members assist in leadership tasks such as preaching, teaching, and supervising recurring church activities. Many members are added to congregations by the outreach of local members and their leaders. Even when large evangelistic campaigns are organized for evangelists by the conference office, the success measured by the number of people who decide to become Adventists is largely influenced by the outreach done by church members in the area.

Impact of Adventism on European Colonists

In his book, "Twenty-Five Years in British Guiana: 1872-1897," Henry Kirke describes his visit to a couple who operated a saw mill along the Demerara River at a place called Sebacabra. He said that the family name was "Allicock." Mrs. Allicock was a Scottish Caucasian, but Mr. Allicock's nationality and race were not mentioned. Generations of Seventh-day Adventists are descendants of the Allicocks in that region. Some still live in Guyana, and others have emigrated. Kirke describes a dance that took place in Christianburg at the house of a Scottish couple named "Paterson" during his visit. The name is also spelt "Patterson" in Scottish records. Many people in Guyana are named Patterson, and many Seventh-day Adventist members have that surname.²⁴

In her book, "Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture," Gaiutra Bahadur discusses the events that caused her indentured grandmother to be at Rose Hall Estate (not to be confused with the town of Rose Hall) near the estuary of the Canje River, close to Cumberland Estate. She notes that Cumberland is a historic name from the Jacobite uprising in Scotland, which led to the migration of Scottish people to British Guiana and other colonies. During those migrations, they generally settled in Berbice. She also mentions that they mostly settled in the Corentyne area and estates east of the Abary River, which separates Demerara from Berbice.²⁵

These names are mentioned because they were encountered in books dealing with Guyana's colonial history. The European British Guiana colonists had many descendants, many of whom are among those who converted and became prominent members of Seventh-day Adventist churches for generations.

Contribution of Adventist Guyanese to the World

Guyana's ten rivers flow into the Atlantic Ocean, maintaining the planet's life-giving water cycle. In the same way, Seventh-day Adventist Guyanese have contributed to the world as they work in many countries and islands, covering every continent. Many have been and are employed by Seventh-day Adventist organizations and institutions, which administer regional and worldwide aspects of the church's mission. Members not employed by the church have also migrated to every corner of the planet and have served with distinction in careers of every kind – artisans, communication experts, educators, entrepreneurs, government officials, health care providers, legal experts, and musicians – in all of the varied aspects of each profession. Many have received national and regional certifications for their excellent contributions.

Conclusion

The major challenge facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Guyana is to increase membership in all ethnic groups of the population, especially among the Indians, the largest segment of Guyana's population. Spreading the Adventist message to the peoples of Guyana would demonstrate the desire to obtain unity and overcome any divisive effects generated by oppressive activities of past history.

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