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# Greenland

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## NATHALIE JOHANSSON

Nathalie Johansson, B.A. (English and History), M.A. (English) (University of Southern Denmark), currently (2019) serves as the management assistant to the Treasury Department the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventists in St. Albans, England. Johansson plans to complete a Ph.D. in Adventist History in the near future.

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Greenland is Canada's nearest neighbor and the world's largest island. It spans over 840,004 sq. mi. (2,175,600 km<sup>2</sup>) of which 708,073 sq. mi. (1,833,900 km<sup>2</sup>) is covered in ice while the remaining 131,931 sq. mi. (341,700 km<sup>2</sup>) is land with no ice.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, Greenland has the world's sparsest population scattered among small villages and towns?

Nuuk is the largest town and the capital city.

Eighty percent of Greenlanders are Inuit, or mixed Danish and Inuit, while the remaining 20 percent are of European descent.<sup>3</sup> Greenland relies heavily on shrimp, crabs and fish for its export market (90 percent). Local village economies depend on seal hunting.<sup>4</sup>

Greenland is well known for its mountains, glaciers and fjords. Roads are scarce and transportation is often very expensive. The majority of the population lives on the west coast and are almost totally economically dependent on budget subsidies from Denmark.<sup>5</sup>

## A Broad History of Greenland

About 4500 years ago arctic people arrived in Greenland from Canada and started to settle. They were later known as the "Independence People One" or what we would today call Stone Age people.<sup>6</sup>

Around 1000 BC the next two waves of people that arrived in Greenland were known as the "Independence People Two" and the Sarkak people.<sup>7</sup> The neo-Eskimos followed almost a century later.<sup>8</sup> In 1250 AD the final influx of people that came to Greenland were known as the Inuits.<sup>9</sup> They are the forebearers of today's Greenlanders from Canada. Around the year 875 AD Icelander Erik Thorvaldson (Erik the Red) arrived in Greenland after sailing from Iceland!<sup>10</sup> He indicated that the island was habitable which lead to the arrival of the people from the north. These people remained in Greenland for almost 500 years.<sup>11</sup> In 1261 AD the people from the north decided to give their allegiance to the Norwegian king Haakon the Old and agreed to pay him taxes in exchange for the maintenance of trade routes!<sup>12</sup> However, in 1348 Magnus Smek, king of Norway and Sweden, forbade foreign trade with Greenland!<sup>13</sup> Norway came under the Danish crown in 1369 and so did Greenland.<sup>14</sup>

The law against foreign sailing to Greenland was tightened in 1425, gradually eradicating the connection the island had with other countries.<sup>15</sup> Danish explorers started to arrive in Greenland and claimed it in 1605.<sup>16</sup> In 1819 a treaty between Norway and Sweden gave up all claims for Greenland.<sup>17</sup>

For the first time, a new law issued in 1953 enabled Greenland to send two representatives to the Danish parliament. Also, in the same year, they were given the status of a country which gave all Greenlanders Danish citizenship as well as all rights and privileges of Danish people.

In 1963 a people's register was introduced.<sup>18</sup> Home rule was established in 1979 and in 1985 Greenland withdrew from the European community while still being part of Denmark.<sup>19</sup>

Home rule allowed Greenland to have jurisdiction over home rule organization, local government, culture, telecommunications, housing, tax, education, foreign trade, transport, public works, renewable resources, conservation and environmental protection, public health, hunting, agriculture and religion. Denmark is responsible for foreign relations, defense, security, currency, and most of the judicial system.<sup>20</sup>

## Language and Culture

The official language of Greenland is an Inuit dialect that is spoken in West Greenland. East Greenlanders speak a different dialect. The second language is Danish which is spoken by almost everyone followed by English, which is spoken by a small percentage of the population.<sup>21</sup>

The Greenlandic culture has its origins in the Inuit culture which is one of the oldest cultures on earth.

## Early Religion and Christianity

Pre-Christian Inuit's believed in spirits that existed in animals and nature. These spirits needed to be called upon by Shamans. Shamanism still exists in Greenland, although not as widespread as before.

In the year 1000, Catholicism was introduced to Greenland by Leif Eriksson, son of Erik Thorvaldson. Leif brought priests with him to help spread the Word of God and Greenland became the first arctic land to embrace Christianity. Tjodhilde's<sup>22</sup> Church was the first church to be built in Greenland and on the North American Continent. Two hundred years later the Catholic faith was well established on the island.

On July 3, 1721 Pastor Hans Egede and his wife Gertrude Rash arrived in Greenland, bringing with them the Lutheran faith.<sup>23</sup> Several missionaries, mainly from Denmark, followed and today Greenland's main Christian faith is Lutheran.

## Adventism

The Adventist message was originally brought to Greenland by fishermen from the Faroe Islands. In 1953 an Adventist named Andreas Nielsen from Denmark began evangelism in Greenland.<sup>24</sup>

Traveling around the country became one of the biggest challenges. Distances in Greenland are great and often the only way to reach places is by boat or airplane.<sup>25</sup> Another challenge was that many in Greenland were suspicious of

the Adventist message, which was partly due to ministers of the state church telling people not to approach the Adventists.<sup>26</sup> It was therefore recommended by Andreas Nielsen to always have at least one Adventist worker in Greenland in order to increase the evangelistic work.<sup>27</sup> The ships passenger lists and intent of travel were published in Greenland when the first Adventist missionaries were trying to go to Greenland, and this only complicated matters. Once Andreas Nielsen arrived in Greenland together with some fellow Adventists only to face the prospect of sleeping on the streets as no one would offer them a place to stay. Finally, a kind former minister of the state church came to their aid and provided accommodations for the night.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the opposition and challenges, some people opened their homes and welcomed the missionaries, and many attended the meetings.<sup>29</sup>

Eventually the campaigns lead by Andreas Nielsen led to the first person baptized, who was a man named Amon Berthelsen.<sup>30</sup> Many more baptisms were to follow.

In addition to the public meetings, literature evangelism became a popular way of spreading the gospel as well as Pathfinders, radio transmissions, clothes for the needy and TV appearances. Adventists would also take in local children who could not stay at home due to alcohol and drug abuse in their families. These children were influenced by the Adventist faith. Eventually this work, especially work for drug and alcohol abuse, led to the gradual breaking down of prejudice against Adventist and even some valuable contacts within the Lutheran state church were made.

Since Greenland is part of Denmark, the monitoring of the Adventist mission on Greenland was overseen by the West-Nordic Union, of which Denmark was a part, until 1992 when the Danish Union of Churches Conference was organized. It was primarily from Denmark members that resources reached Greenland. The Greenland Mission continues to be under the Danish Union of Churches Conference to this day.<sup>31</sup>

Anna Hogganvik, a nurse from Norway, officially opened a physical therapy clinic in 1959.<sup>32</sup> The clinic was part of a larger building that contained the church, a pastoral apartment, and an apartment for the person or couple running the clinic.<sup>33</sup> Despite its success, the clinic eventually had to close in 1992 due to the introduction of a new health care system in Greenland that meant Greenland was now in charge of their own health care instead of Denmark, which had previously been responsible for the country's healthcare.<sup>34</sup>

In March 1991, the official membership statistics showed 16 Adventist church members in Greenland. This number declined to 13 in 1992.<sup>35</sup> This number has since declined and today the church in Greenland is served by self-supporting missionaries. Greenland is now one of the countries of the world where Seventh-day Adventist work is not currently established as of December 31, 2017.<sup>36</sup>

The Adventist Church building in Greenland together with the attached physical therapy clinic were sold on May 1, 1998, and the building now functions as an art museum owned by the local council.<sup>37</sup> The Danish Union Conference holds the money from the sale of the clinic and church on Greenland in trust. The money is earmarked for missions in Greenland, but due to the difficulties of mission work and the past experience of very few results, the money has so far not been used.<sup>38</sup>

Much work remains to be done in Greenland before the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 can be completed. The greatest challenge is to gain an even better understanding of the Greenlandic culture and adjust evangelistic methods to reach the native population more effectively.

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