



Florida Conference headquarters, 351 S. State Road 434, Altamonte Springs (2014-).

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Florida Conference

A. LEE BENNETT JR.

A. Lee Bennett Jr., B.A. in media technology/media communication. After graduating from Andrews University, born-and-raised Floridian Lee began an internship in the Florida Conference Communication Department that became a permanent position lasting 25 years until September 2017. He now serves as Print Shop manager in the Service Center and retains a strong interest in factual accuracy of Florida Conference's history.

The Florida Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Southern Union Conference.

Territory: Florida (except Bay, Calhoun, Escambia, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton, and Washington Counties).

Statistics (June 30, 2019): Churches, 212; membership, 63,904; population, 19,875,448

Origins

In the July 1874 issue of the *True Missionary*, Stephen N. Haskell reported that an un-named black man who converted to Adventism at an unspecified location in 1873 “then went to his people in Florida.” He found many of them eager for his books and tracts and some willing to adopt the Sabbath. This may be the first record of a Seventh-day Adventist presence in Florida, though it is not known whether this man won any permanent converts.

As early as 1876, news items from Florida began appearing in *Review and Herald*. The October 5, 1876, issue includes a letter from Jacksonville referring to “a little company [of believers] who have accepted the seventh day.”² The next year, there is mention of six Seventh-day Adventists in St. Augustine and approximately the same number in Jacksonville.

Near the beginning of 1883, John O. Corliss visited families of believers who were scattered throughout the state, but the only evangelism reported to have taken place was conducted by laypersons. Among these was Charles P. Whitford from Vermont. He lived in Moultrie (present-day St. Augustine Shores), a new settlement south of St. Augustine, where he reported a few Seventh-day Adventist families residing and some new converts in the county of St. Johns.

In 1885, G. G. Rupert, a minister sent by the General Conference, held the first series of evangelistic meetings on record in Florida. He preached near Terra Ceia Bay on the Gulf coast, forty miles south of Tampa, where approximately twenty Seventh-day Adventists from Michigan had settled. Ten converts came into Adventism as a result of Rupert’s work, and he organized a church of twenty-two members. This church, the forerunner of present-day Palmetto church, remained the largest congregation in Florida as late as 1895.

Soon after leaving the Terra Ceia church, Rupert baptized six people and organized a church in Sorrento. This central Florida community was the home of L. H. Crisler who had heard Seventh-day Adventist preaching in Iowa, but did not accept the faith until moving to Florida. Within a few years, he would become the first Florida Conference president in 1893.

In 1886, Rupert organized two churches in Orlando and Jacksonville. These churches later disbanded when the members relocated, but were reorganized in 1890 and 1898, respectively. These churches exemplify one of several difficulties of the early work in Florida—a fluctuating population. Evangelists, preaching to winter residents, often found their best members leaving for their northern homes in the spring. Recent settlers to Florida who comprised the membership of small, new churches could disappear almost overnight. They often arrived with much enthusiasm but little adaptability to the new climate or the unfamiliar requirements of the soil and season. Ultimately, many soon moved away to seek a better location or other employment. Because of the population instability in those early days, S. H. Lane, who was sent to Georgia and Florida in 1888, recommended to the General Conference that the intended organization of a conference in Florida be delayed. However, the population’s migratory habits did have one advantage. After returning from Florida, Samuel Fulton reported to the 1887 General Conference in Oakland, California, that most new Floridians in the cities and towns

had broken their ties with the past to some degree and were ready to embrace new ideas. Fulton reported a liberal spirit and a lack of prejudice. Other workers, who followed Fulton, found this report to be true, although active opposition sometimes developed in the more conservative localities. For example, L. H. Crisler encountered an irate citizen in a back-woods post office who assaulted him viciously until bystanders restrained the person.

Two other challenges to the work in Florida were occasional yellow fever scares and winter freezes. The threat of yellow fever epidemics discouraged people from attending public gatherings such as tent meetings scheduled in 1887 for Tampa and the following year in Lake City. In spite of the fear, yellow fever did not actually enter peninsular Florida.

Remembered for more than half a century as “the big freeze,” cold temperatures wiped out the 1894-1895 citrus crop and outright killed many groves. Consequently, the 1895 camp meeting was cancelled because of the resulting economic depression. For several years, church budgets and colporteur book sales suffered from the effects.³

Organizational History

In spite of the setbacks, a decade of organization and progress lay ahead in the 1890s. At the beginning of the decade, groups of believers (both organized and unorganized) were reported in the areas of Apopka, Earlton, Fernandina, Gainesville, Jacksonville, Lake City, Moultrie, Orange Heights, Orlando, Palmetto, Pine Hills, St. Andrews Bay, St. Augustine, Sorrento, Tampa, and Waldo, although not all of these groups were permanent.

Six churches were represented when the Florida Conference organized in September 1893 at a meeting held in Barberville, north of Orlando. The conference began life with three ordained ministers, two licentiates, and 139 members, its territory comprising the entire state of Florida. At the same meeting, members organized a tract society and a Sabbath School association.

A number of other firsts were reported in this decade. In 1892, literature evangelist S. T. Page supervised the first “company of canvassers,” and the members of Barberville (organized in February) and DeLeon Springs erected the first Seventh-day Adventist church building. In November 1894, the Florida Conference conducted its first camp meeting and first regular constituency session, held in Tampa. It was said to be the first camp meeting of any denomination in that area. The campers, including 100 people from Terra Ceia and elsewhere in Manatee County, who traveled up the bay in two schooners and were housed in fifty tents and apartments. Alonzo T. Jones spoke twice daily. Other speakers were George Ide Butler, former General Conference president who had retired to Florida in 1888, and R. M. Kilgore, superintendent of the Southern District (General Conference District No. 2), who stayed after the end of the meeting to organize the Tampa church.

The decade also saw efforts to evangelize diverse populations within the state. This included house-to-house work among both black and white residents reported at Lawtey (1891) and Milton (1897). M. T. Ivory, a black licentiate (later ordained), began working in Orlando in April 1897. In September 1899, Ivory reported preaching to white people for three weeks in Punta Gorda and working in various black communities throughout the year. A church was organized in Orlando that same year as a result of Ivory's labors.

Hopes of beginning mission work among Seminole Native Americans were raised in 1896 as a result of contacts that W. L. Bird made at Chokoloskee in the course of a trip to the visit a small Seventh-day Adventist group on the southern Gulf Coast. By 1897, the conference president felt the opportunity was opening, but nothing permanent resulted. Fifty years later, there were reports of one Adventist—a half-Seminole woman whose tribal membership gave her access—trying to reach these Native Americans.

Immediately preceding the Spanish-American War in 1898, solicitations were made for relief contributions to aid Cuban refugees in Tampa, and plans were made to distribute Spanish-language publications at local cigar factories where people were hired to read to the employees as they rolled cigars. Once again, little seems to have resulted from the initiative. Not until the mid-twentieth century would the work among Spanish-speaking communities begin to develop in a substantial way, ultimately leading to organization of the Spanish ministries department in 1979 (see *Departmental Organization Highlights* below).

On May 1, 1901, the former General Conference District No. 2 was re-organized into the Southern Union Conference, with the Florida Conference as one of the its constituents. In November of that year, the Florida Conference elected its second president, George Ide Butler, who had twice before served as General Conference president. The following January, at the first session of the new Southern Union Conference, Butler was elected union president, but continued as president of the Florida Conference as well. Thus, until 1904, Florida Conference's president lived in Nashville, Tennessee.

Changes in Territory

In 1908, seven of Florida's northwestern counties were transferred to the Alabama Conference, as were two others in 1922. A tenth was transferred in 1932 to the new Alabama-Mississippi Conference. Today, the Apalachicola River in Florida's panhandle is the dividing landmark between the Florida Conference's territory and these ten counties that belong to what is now known as Gulf States Conference.

Membership Patterns

In its first 10-year period, the Florida Conference doubled its membership, reaching 286 members in twelve churches by 1903. By the end of the next decade, 1913, there were 744 members in twenty-seven churches that included St. Petersburg (1905), Daytona (1909), and Miami (1910).

In the Florida Conference's history, annual membership figures have only twice shown a reduction. The first time, however, was not an actual decrease of members. In 1945, the conference's black churches were

transferred to the newly organized South Atlantic Conference. This reduced the Florida Conference totals from sixty-eight to forty-seven churches and from 6,038 to 4,579 members.⁴

The second reduction was realized across several recent years during a process of reviewing and reconciling records of missing or inactive members. Total membership was reduced from 65,156 at year-end 2016 to 63,123 as of February 2019.

Institutions and Ministries

Greater Miami Adventist Academy began operation in 1912 as an independent school under the name Greater Miami Elementary School. It became a four-year academy in 1961 and a Florida Conference-sponsored institution on January 1, 2000.

Forest Lake Academy was founded as Lake Winyah Academy in 1918 in the vicinity of the Florida Sanitarium. The school to the Forest City community near Apopka (north of Orlando) and renamed as Forest Lake Academy in 1926. Its campus provided a permanent camp meeting site for many decades.

Camp Kulaqua began in 1953 when a group of members purchased land in High Springs, north of Gainesville, to be used as a youth camp. Today, it serves as a year-round retreat and conference center in addition to its annual summer camp program.

Pine Lake Retreat, an additional facility operated by Camp Kulaqua, originated in the 1950s as Groveland Academy. The property was donated to the Florida Conference in 1994 and was transformed into Pine Lake Retreat. The buildings were later remodeled and updated while additional retreat amenities were installed on the property. As of late 2018, the facility was listed for sale, though Camp Kulaqua was still accepting reservations for use on a limited basis.

Florida Living Retirement Community opened in 1965 a short distance from Forest Lake Academy. The adjacent nursing center was opened on June 8, 1970.

North Tampa Christian Academy opened its doors on August 20, 2018, as the Florida Conference's newest sponsored four-year academy, housed in a new state-of-the-art facility located in the Wesley Chapel community. Along with the secondary school, an elementary school and an early childhood facility are part of the institution. The school's history extends to the 1890s when it began as a church-based primary school. In 1917, the school was moved to its own small facility. During sixty years at its prior location, the school was known as Tampa Junior Academy and later Tampa Adventist Academy.

Headquarters Changes

Based on available information, the Florida Conference operated out of a variety of temporary offices during its earliest decades, possibly in connection with Orlando churches. The congregation known today as Orlando Central Church built a facility in 1917 on the corner of Rosalind and Robinson Avenues that was designed to also

permanently house the Florida Conference offices.

During the 1920s, the Florida Conference built its own separate office facility at 311 North Rosalind Avenue, neighboring the church. Internal conference reports indicating that the move to the new building took place in 1923 conflict with Orange County property records, which state that the facility was built in 1928. Though the former Orlando Central Church building no longer exists, the former conference headquarters building was still standing at its downtown Orlando location as of 2018, when it was being prepped for office space leases.

In 1960, conference headquarters moved to a new facility at 616 East Rollins Street in Orlando. Sale of the Rosalind Avenue building had been finalized 1958, so the conference operated from a large old house on Hillcrest Avenue until construction of the new Rollins Avenue location was complete. Initially, the new building housed administration on the upper floor, the Adventist Book Center (ABC) on the lower floor, and ministry departments on a split level.⁵ The ABC later moved into an addition made on the building's west side, and ministry departments expanded into the ABC's former location on the bottom floor.

After the conference vacated the building in 1992, it was used for several years by Florida Hospital for the human resources office and other departments. It was demolished in 2005 to make room for the new Florida Hospital Ginsburg Tower. Interestingly, the Ginsburg Tower Emergency Room entrance is now in almost the exact spot where the main entrance to the Florida Conference office was located.

The Florida Conference purchased the Wymore building at 655 N. Wymore Road in Winter Park for its new headquarters. After interior renovations to accommodate both the conference offices and the Adventist Book Center, the grand opening took place in the summer of 1992.⁶

Just under twenty years later, on January 27, 2012, the Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) purchased the entire Wymore property to make room for the expansion of highway Interstate 4. The building was demolished in October 2015. However, for more than two years following the DOT purchase, the Florida Conference continued to use the facility rent-free until it relocated to its present location at 351 S. State Road 434 in Altamonte Springs in April of 2014.

Departmental Organization Highlights

The Florida Conference has consistently expanded the breadth and reach of its departmental ministries. In 1892, the formation of the first company of canvassers, supervised by agent S. T. Page, pre-dated the organization of Florida Conference that took place the following year. Originally known as the Sabbath School Association, the department began in the days following conference organization in 1893. Known by various names, including Estate Services and Trust Services, the department of Planned Giving was instituted in 1861 as part of the Florida Conference Association, working with legal documents. The first coordinator of Spanish Ministries, Rolando de los Ríos, was appointed the conference's vice president for Hispanic Ministries in 1991, although outreach in the Spanish language began in 1979. As of 2018, Florida's Hispanic membership was 17,878 with

fifty-nine churches, twenty-five companies, and eleven mission groups. The first leader, Hazel Gordon (the wife of then-president Malcolm D. Gordon), encouraged the placement of Women's Ministries directors in each church beginning in 1989 and helped plan the first Florida Conference Women's Retreat in 1990.

Significant Evangelistic and Outreach Programs

The Florida conference is also active in evangelism and community outreach. The MagaBook program, begun January 4, 1990, provides scholarship money for students as well as contacts with communities through Adventist literature. With the help of the former Adventist Communication Network, and later from both Hope TV and Three Angels Broadcasting Network, Florida was among the first conferences to broadcast camp meeting via satellite across North America, beginning in 1996 and continuing through 2008. As of 2018, Florida's camp meeting is broadcast through online streaming. Three NET evangelism series broadcasts took place in the 2010s: *One Hope* in 2012, *A New Song* in 2013, and *Following Jesus* in 2014.

The Florida Conference's disaster response team has consistently provided aid after hurricanes, tornadoes, and other crises throughout the state as well as other conferences. The team is federally recognized and has been requested on various occasions to oversee operation of emergency supply distribution warehouses following natural disasters.

Through the diverse language groups represented in the conference, including English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Korean, Vietnamese, Burmese, Filipino, and Hebrew, the Florida Conference makes resources and personnel available to further the task of going into all the world and preaching the gospel to every creature.

Recent High and Low Points

In 2003, fifty positions in the conference were eliminated as a result of budget shortfalls—particularly the high cost of insurance and significantly reduced tithe receipts. However, recovery was rapid and positions were refilled as finances permitted.

With the intent of fostering collaboration and reducing operational redundancies, Integrated Youth Ministries was established in 2010, merging all departments that focused on young people. After only a few years, it became evident that the departments operated more efficiently when separate and the concept was abandoned.

North Tampa Christian Academy opened in 2018 featuring a modern, 21st-century curriculum (see the *Institutions and Ministries* section above).

Outlook

With regard to the mission lying ahead for the conference, Allan Machado, the newly-elected president, stated in 2018: "Florida Conference ministers within a particular context. There is but one way to be the church, and that is incarnational, within a specific concrete setting. The gospel is always translated into a culture, and God's

people are called to minister in that specific context the same way Jesus was relevant in the culture of the first century in Palestine. This is the Church that we strive to be at Florida Conference.”

Presidents

Two presidents in Florida Conference’s history have served two separate (nonconsecutive) terms: L. H. Crisler, first president, 1893-1901, and fourth president, 1906-1907; Claiborne Bell Stephenson, third president, 1904-1906, and eighth president, 1919-1921.

Rufus Wells Parmele, who served as fifth president from 1907-1912, championed the effort to establish the Florida Sanitarium in 1908, later renamed Florida Hospital and most recently, AdventHealth.

Michael F. Cauley, twenty-third president, 2003–2018, was Florida Conference’s longest-serving president at 15 years.

List of Presidents: L. H. Crisler (1893-1901); George Ide Butler (1900-1904); Claiborne Bell Stephenson (1904-1906); L. H. Crisler (1906-1907); Rufus Wells Parmele, (1907-1912); William Henry Heckman (1913-1917); A. R. Sandborn (1917-1919); Claiborne Bell Stephenson (1919-1921); John Lewis Shuler (1921-1926); Arthur Samuel Booth (1926-1933); Louis Klaer Dickson (1933-1936); Lewis Ellis Lenheim (1936-1941); Leonard Clark Evans (1941-1947); Reuben H. Nightingale (1947-1954); Donald R. Rees (1954-1957); Harold H. Schmidt (1957-1965); Wallace O. Coe (1965-1973); Henry J. Carubba (1973-1984); Malcolm D. Gordon (1985-1990); Obed O. Graham (1990-1997); Gordon L. Retzer (1997-2000); H. Lewis Hendershot (2000-2003); Michael F. Cauley (2003-2018); C. Allan Machado (2018-present).

Headquarters Address: 351 S. State Road 434; Altamonte Springs, Florida 32714-3824

SOURCES

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“Florida Conference Opens New Winter Park Headquarters.” *ARH*, August 27, 1992.

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Untitled paragraph, “Progress of the Cause” section. *ARH*, October 5, 1876.

NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, "Florida Conference," accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=12801>].
2. Untitled paragraph, "Progress of the Cause" section, *ARH*, October 5, 1876, 111.
3. "Origins" section adapted from "Florida Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition, 1996.
4. "Organizational History," from the beginning of the section to this point adapted and updated from *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition, 1996.
5. Charles L. Beeler, "New Office Building Opened," *Southern Tidings*, March 2, 1960, 4. The cover of this issue featured a photograph of the "new modernistic Florida Conference Headquarters building" (caption, page 2).
6. "Florida Conference Opens New Winter Park Headquarters," *ARH*, August 27, 1992, 7.
7. Statement provided to author, February 7, 2019.

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