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Antigua and Barbuda

STAFFORD H. BYERS, AND BERTRAND JOSEPH

Stafford H. Byers

Bertrand Joseph

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Background

The twin isles of Antigua and Barbuda in the eastern Caribbean gained independence from Britain in 1981. The government is democratically elected with the prime minister as head of government and the British Monarch represented by the governor general as head of state. Antigua is 108 square miles (280 square kilometers) while Barbuda is 62 square miles (160 square kilometers). These islands boast over 365 white, sandy beaches coupled with a relaxed atmosphere ideal for tourism, their main industry. The population of 97,000 has ethnicities of 91 percent African descent, 4.5 percent mixed race, and 1.7 percent European descent; the remainder is of Asian, Arab, and Jewish descent.¹ Around 93 percent of the population is Christian: 63 percent is Protestant, comprised of Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Moravians, Methodists, Wesleyan Holiness, Church of God, Baptists, Jehovah Witnesses, and unaffiliated members. Roman Catholics comprise 8.25 percent.²

History of Adventism in Territory

The Adventist message officially reached Antigua when Elder William Arnold arrived in December 1888. Unofficially, the message predated his arrival through John R. Brathwaite's efforts and the actions of a ship captain in British Guiana (Guyana).

Brathwaite, a Caribbean native, was baptized in the United States in 1879. When he returned to the region, he solicited tracts from the International Tract Society and distributed them throughout the Lesser Antilles. Also in this period, a ship captain littered the wharf in Guyana with "Signs of the Times" magazines. This literature's influence permeated the region and elicited requests to the Foreign Mission Board to send workers to the region.

While canvassing in Antigua, Elder Arnold met several important people, including James Ackerman, an estate owner who devised a system for his workers to distribute Adventist literature all over the island.³ Elder Arnold also sold a book to a gentleman who sent it to his son, James Palmer, in Kingston, Jamaica. After reading the book, James Palmer wrote to the International Tract Society soliciting Adventist literature, which he distributed around Kingston, starting the Adventist work in Jamaica.⁴

After several months, Elder Arnold left Antigua. In his absence, Mrs. A. Roskruge, who accepted the message in London in 1888 and returned to Antigua in 1889, continued the work in Antigua and organized a small Sabbath school.⁵ In 1890, Elder Arnold returned to Antigua with Dexter Ball.⁶ There, they found two Sabbath schools in operation. One was found in Old Road and conducted by a Moravian teacher and preacher, Henry Peters, his wife, Sarah, and their six children, including G. E. Peters. The other was in St. John and conducted by Mrs. Roskruge after her return from England.⁷ She was later involved in the development of the Adventist work in Dominica and Barbados.

The first evangelistic campaign was conducted by Elder Ball in St. John. Ann Madgwick, Mrs. Roskruge's mother, provided the venue. Seating capacity was 200, but attendance often exceeded 300.⁸ A newspaper advertisement stated: "We are requested to mention that Elder Ball [of the Seventh-day Adventists] from New York will hold a series of meetings in Antigua to commence Monday next in Mr. Geo. Madgwick's Parlour at 7:30 p.m. No collection."⁹

Beginning on April 13, 1891, newspaper articles criticized Adventism. One article was so slanderous, it triggered a response from Elder Ball.¹⁰ This response resulted in 10 baptisms at Fort James: Widow Madgwick, Widow Martin, Mrs. Pickens, Miss Walter and one of her brothers, Mr. and Mrs. Scotland, Miss D. Skerritt, and Mr. and Mrs. Wheatland.¹¹ This constituted the first company in Antigua. Elder Ball left the region in 1892 and was not replaced until 1896. In the interim, Mrs. Florence Pickens, sister of Mrs. A. Roskruge and wife of Attorney Thomas Pickens, owner of Ffryes Estate, led the company. Elder Elam van Deusen was the next worker to visit Antigua. He first visited in April and again in October 1896, when he baptized the first four daughters of the Peters family.¹² G. E. Peters and his mother were baptized around 1898.¹³ On February 22, 1903, St. John's Church was dedicated.¹⁴ Times were challenging, yet the church regularly gained new members (primarily from Bolans, Old Road, and Liberta) and was spearheaded by Pastor L. E. Wellman and Brother Alex Smith.

Between 1906-1920, laymen like Thomas Simon, William Josiah, and T. J. Warner (who later became a pastor) emerged as leaders. People traveled long distances by foot to get to St. Johns and, later, to the Old Road and Liberta churches on Sabbaths. Between 1920-1940, churches were planted in Seatons (Seaglans), Bolans, Freetown, and All Saints. In 1925, the Edwards family took the message to Barbuda and were followed by George Samuel.¹⁵ Laymen like Cornelius Bowen, Jeremiah Peters, Newton Daniels, and James Adams also enlisted in advancing the work in Antigua. In 1931, the Leeward Islands Mission office was moved from St. Lucia to Antigua. In 1935, it was moved to Barbados; in 1961, it was renamed East Caribbean Conference.¹⁶ Also in this time, St. Johns Church established a primary school that has since become Antigua SDA Academy.¹⁷

1950-1980 was the turning point for Adventism in Antigua and Barbuda. First, in the early years, churches appeared all over Antigua, specifically in Jennings, Cedar Grove, John Hughes, New Winthropes, New Field, Parham, Potters, and Kentish Road (Tindall). In later years, Cardinal and Sylvanie King, Gladwin Harris, Ivy Josiah-James, and others worked tirelessly in Barbuda while the work continued unabated in Antigua, resulting in church planting in Pigotts, Pares, Grays Farm, Villa, Clare Hall, Urlings, Bendals, and Willikies.

Mabel Harris, James Beazer, Stanley Thomas, and others also contributed to the work in Barbuda.¹⁸ In July 1980, Easton Ogarro conducted a revival in Barbuda, resulting in six baptisms.¹⁹ In 1985, Pastor Conroy Reynolds

conducted another revival there, resulting in five baptisms. In 1986, Adventists in Barbuda dedicated their first church building to the honor and glory of God.²⁰ Also, during this period, several Antiguans entered the preaching, colporteur, and teaching ministry. Vera James was the first Antiguan principal of the Adventist school. Pastors Ives Roberts and Eugene Daniels were the first two native pastors assigned to districts in Antigua. Since then, others, including veterans like J. S. U. Burton; pastors N. C. Gooding, C. G. Van Putten, Roy Hoyte, M. G. McMillan, L. E. Mulrairie, Joseph Mills, N. A. Premdas, J. Glen Roberts, Leon Phillips, Everette Howell, and Jansen Trotman; principals Elsie James, J. D. Alleyne, Josiah Maynard, Errol Thompson, Rosalind Aaron, and Delvin Chatham; Bible workers Irisdeen Francis and Gwendolyn Robins; and colporteurs Joshua James, James Fenton, Eugene Brathwaite, and Lee Mitchell have contributed to the development of Adventism in Antigua and Barbuda.

Current Status of Adventism in Territory

Today, Adventism is highly esteemed in Antigua and Barbuda. It includes youth work, an education system, a radio station, a credit union, an early childhood center, a senior citizens home, a book center, a campground, and 31 congregations across 14 districts served by 15 ordained and three commissioned pastors.

Currently, with over 12,000 members, one in eight residents is an Adventist. Adventists serve at the highest levels of the private and public sectors as the Governor General, managers, teachers, nurses, ambassadors, permanent secretaries to ministers including the Prime Minister, parliamentarians, magistrates, judges, physicians, attorneys, and ministers of government.

Institution Changes

In 1975, East Caribbean Conference was divided, and Antigua and Barbuda became part of North Caribbean Conference. In 2011, North Caribbean Conference was divided, and Antigua and Barbuda became the headquarters of South Leeward Mission. In 2019, South Leeward Mission became a conference.

Adventist Antiguans

Many Antiguans have contributed to the Adventist work around the world. In the Trans-European Division, Ian W. Sweeney, president of the British Union, is Antiguan. In the Inter-American Division (IAD), George W. Brown, former president, is Antiguan/Kittitian. Rachael Peters, a pioneer teacher in Trinidad and G. E. Peters's sister, was Antiguan.²¹ Others such as James Daniels, field secretary of IAD; Eugene Daniels, former president of the Caribbean Union Conference; B. N. Josiah, John R. Josiah, and Silton Brown, former presidents of North Caribbean Conference (NCC); Peter Aaron, former secretary of NCC; Livingstone Aaron, former president of St. Lucia Mission; Carson Green, Wayne Knowles, and Krista Moore, the respective president, secretary, and treasurer of South Leeward Conference; and many other Antiguans have contributed to the Adventist work.

Antiguans have also made their mark in North America. Cryston Josiah, Secretary of Central States Conference, is Antiguan/Trinidadian. Reginald Michael was a stewardship director of the Northeastern conference. George King was a vice president of Southeast California Conference. Agatha Crichlow, G. E. Peters's sister, and her Barbadian husband, J. F. Crichlow, did pioneer work in Alabama and were among the first to establish Adventist schools among black people in South Carolina, a work she performed until her untimely death in 1912.²² R. E. Williams was a pioneer evangelist in Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida until his sudden death in 1918.²³ James G. Dasent was a gifted pastor and evangelist and the first president of Lake Region Conference, the first all-black conference. G. E. Peters was a renowned pastor, administrator, and evangelist, former secretary of the colored department and world field secretary of the General Conference, and an elementary school in Hyattsville, Maryland, and the Fine Arts Building at Oakwood University are named in his honor. All of these people were born in Antigua.

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