

# French Antilles-Guiana Union Conference

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The French Antilles-Guiana Union Conference is a part of the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. It was organized in 1989 and reorganized in 2010. Comprised of the territories of French Guiana, Guadeloupe (and its dependencies), Martinique, Saint Barthelemy, and Saint Martin, its headquarters is in Fort-de-France, Martinique. As of June 30, 2021, it included 151 churches with a membership of 30,183. The region's population was 1,074,000.

## Early Beginnings

Missionaries from neighboring British colonies were the first to evangelize the French colonies in the Caribbean—Guadeloupe, Guiana, and Martinique. Philip Giddings, originally from Georgetown in (British) Guiana, played an important role in this missionary endeavor. After studying theology in Battle Creek College, Michigan, United States, he and his wife, Louise Paters, born in the island of Antigua, visited the Caribbean to teach biblical truths. On the morning of May 8, 1902, he was present in the bay of Saint-Pierre in Martinique and witnessed the explosion of the volcano, Montagne Pelée. Miraculously, he escaped a certain death. He had missed the boat to Saint Lucia the day before, May 7, 1902, and that ship sank in the bay of the devastated city<sup>1</sup>

## Guadeloupe: First Steps of Adventism in the Colony

Philip Giddings, who spoke perfect French, stayed in Guadeloupe for the first time in 1910. He returned with his family in 1914 and moved to Rue Alsace-Lorraine in Pointe-a-Pitre, the economic capital of the colony. Until 1919, he crisscrossed the island to distribute religious tracts, sell Bibles and doctrinal books, preach. During the first phase of Adventism, the period called *The Church of the English*,<sup>2</sup> Giddings organized the first Sabbath School on the island in his home. Most of the members of the two communities established on the island were originally from the British islands of the Caribbean: for example, Phips and his daughter Edith lived in Pointe-a-Pitre and in Capesterre-Belle-Eau Joshua James and his three sons came from Antigua. Even though Giddings left the island in 1919-1920 to live in Martinique, this first phase lasted until 1928.

In 1928, a killer hurricane devastated Guadeloupe, destroying people and buildings indiscriminately. Most of the members of the two congregations in Pointe-a-Pitre and Capesterre, who mainly work in the banana plantations destroyed by the hurricane, returned to their countries of origin, migrating to better areas. Discouraged, some left the Adventist movement.

In spite of the devastation caused by the hurricane, the church also experienced a dynamic resurgence in 1928. A new Adventist center opened in the town of Morne-a-l'Eau under the leadership of Andree Herisson, the heir of a French colonist family, the Lapierras of Meninville. After one year of studying theology at the Adventist seminary in Collonges-sous-Saleve (Haute Savoie), France, she was baptized and returned to Guadeloupe in 1928. She settled on the family property in the Esperance district of Morne-a-l'Eau, where she started preaching and organized a Sabbath School in her home. Philip Giddings visited Guadeloupe the same year and preached to the members of Herisson's group, among whom was a 17-year-old named Paul Chovino.

From that time on, the growth of Adventism in Guadeloupe was continuous. A colporteur, Charles Brown, stayed there for a while around 1925. A pastor from Haiti, Michel Isaac, visited and conducted evangelism in Morne-a-l'Eau at the end of the 1920s, and after that the French Antilles Mission was established in 1930. A permanent missionary, Aime Linzau (1909-1998), was appointed to the island in the early 1930s. In 1933, he studied at the Adventist college in Trinidad for one year. The mission also appointed two literature evangelists, Serge Jean-Elie (1909-2002) and Eugene Berle (1907-2002), in April and July of 1932 respectively. Andre Herisson offered a property of one hectare (2,470 acres) in Morne-a-l'Eau to the new congregation, and in 1932 financed the construction of the first Adventist church on the island and in the French Antilles.

At first, these early missionaries lived in the back of the Morne-a-l'Eau church. But at the end of 1932, the two colporteurs settled with their families in the headquarters of the organization in Pointe-a-Pitre on Anatole Leger Street in a building rented to them by Joseph Bigord. That building became the first headquarters of the Adventist Church in Guadeloupe, and a church was organized there on May 26, 1934, with nineteen members. Among the members were Henry Bigord and another pioneer of Christian education, Henri Beauregard.

The town of Morne-à-l'Eau remained the first landmark center of Adventism in the colony. After the general constitution meeting in December 1965, the leaders of the new Guadeloupe Adventist Mission choose to establish headquarters in this town on Debarcadere Street. The headquarters remained there until 1968.

By the beginning of the 1930s, all over the territory of the colony, new groups and Sabbath Schools had been organized and the number of Seventh-day Adventists had steadily grown. But Pointe-à-Pitre and the neighboring town of Abymes, both located in the central part of the island, became the main centers of Gospel preaching from which it progressively spread to other towns. In 1933, Adventism promoted the dissemination and reading of the Bible to a level unprecedented in the history of the island. This emphasis on the Bible troubled some members of the Catholic Church, the de facto official religion despite the official position of secularism.<sup>3</sup> Some

parish priests talked about heresy and excommunicated or threatened to excommunicate the faithful guilty of buying and reading Adventist books.

## Administrative Evolution

On the administrative and regional plan, the territory evolved into several church entities. At the union level, from 1934 to 1957, the island was part of the Caribbean Union, with headquarters in Trinidad. From 1957 to 1989, it was integrated into the Franco-Haitian Union which brought together French territories (Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Guiana) and the French-speaking country of Haiti. This union was managed from Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. But political upheavals in Haiti, especially in the middle of the years of the 1980s, made it exceedingly difficult to work out of this union. After the overthrow of the lifetime president, Jean-Claude Duvalier, in February 1986, the relationships and communications between the French territories and the union headquarters become more and more difficult both ways. The division officers, concerned with the proper functioning of these territories without endangering the safety of both parties, decided to divide the union in two entities in 1989: one became the French Antilles and Guiana Union and the other, the Haitian Union. In April 1989, with Guiana and Martinique, Guadeloupe became part of the French Antilles and Guiana Union (UAGF).

Guadeloupe had been part of the French Antilles Mission and then the French Antilles and Guiana Mission from 1934 to 1965. Subsequently, the island underwent three administrative phases. In December 1965, it became the Guadeloupe Mission. The first missionaries to serve and lead the new mission Guiscard Sablier, president and treasurer, and Antoine Oculi, secretary. They faced many challenges as they guided the fledgling mission strengthened its foundations, and fostered the progress already made to date. Additionally, they built a new administration.

Eleven years later, in 1966 when Cyclone Ines struck the island and again in 1976 when the volcano La Soufriere threatened to erupt, the mission was forced to restudy its objectives as it rebuilt. Despite these setbacks, new leaders were trained. The gospel was proclaimed, and church membership grew from 2,185 to 5,225. During this time, the number of churches increased from twenty-three to twenty-nine. Additional property was also acquired on which were built churches, an evangelistic center, a vacation center at Duportail, the main building on the school campus is built, and the mission offices.

The second administrative phase began in 1977 when the Inter-American Division felt that the mission was sufficiently mature and organized to become a conference. They recommend the change of status.

The Guadeloupe Conference initiated the third phase of its development in 2003 when it launched statutory reforms as recommended by the French Antilles and Guiana Union (UAGF) president, Guy Roger. While the previous entities had operated within the framework of the July 1901 law,<sup>4</sup> the purpose of this reform was to follow French laws, separating religious activities (1905 law<sup>5</sup>) from secular activities (1901 law).

In October 2003, two entities were created: The Adventist Church of Guadeloupe (ACA: Adventist Religious Association), the exclusive purpose of which is to oversee and support the conference's churches, and the Adventist Guadeloupe Federation of Cultural and Social Associations (FACSAG), which provides the legal framework for its social, humanitarian, health and education activities. Together, these two entities oversee the church's ministries and safeguard its spirit values, local operation, and mission. This arrangement also allows for the evaluation of needs and the design of strategies adapted to the many challenges the Church faces.

## Further Developments and Challenges

As church membership grew, additional church buildings and other facilities were added. By 2018, the Church owned a conference office building, sixty-one churches, a multipurpose center/gymnasium (1980), four primary schools, a kindergarten, a junior and senior high school, a vacation center (1974), a relief center managed by SAAG (2012), a radio station, a bookstore, and a health food store.

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### SOURCES

Chandler, Jean-Luc, "Seventh-day Adventists in Martinique." Unpublished manuscript, 2003. In the author's private collection.

"Guadeloupe, Three Quarters of a Century of Adventism." *Reflét*, special issue, May 1997.

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### NOTES

1. See Jean-Luc Chandler, *Seventh-day Adventists in Martinique*, unpublished manuscript, 2003.
2. This expression is used in the article "Guadeloupe, Three Quarters of a Century of Adventism," *Reflét*, special issue, May 1997.
3. The law regarding separation of churches and the State, establishing secularism in France, was passed on December 9, 1905. Secularism is a "political concept implying the separation of civil society and religious society." The State exercises no religious power, and the churches exercise no political power.
4. The July 1, 1901, law concerning the association agreement published in the *Official Journal* of July 5, 1901.
5. This is the law of December 9, 1905, concerning the separation of churches and State, published in the *Official Journal* of December 11, 1905.

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