The people of Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific first learned about the biblical Sabbath from John Tay in 1886, and the story of Pitcairn has become deeply entrenched in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific.

**Pitcairn Territory and History**

A British Overseas Territory, the Pitcairn Islands group includes the islands of Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno. The only inhabited island in the group is Pitcairn, which is a small volcanic outcrop that is approximately 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) long and 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) wide. It is situated at latitude 25.04° south and longitude 130.06° west in the South Pacific, which is approximately 2,170 kilometers (1,350 miles) east southeast of Tahiti. The islands' administrative headquarters is situated in Auckland, New Zealand, which is 5,310 kilometers (3,300 miles) to the west. The capital, Adamstown, is located above Bounty Bay.

The population in 2019 was about fifty. The inhabitants of Pitcairn are descended from the mutineers of the HMS *Bounty* and their Tahitian companions.

**Initial Missionary Efforts of the Seventh-day Adventist Church**
In the 1870s James White and John Loughborough shipped some Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) literature to Pitcairn, arousing sufficient interest to prompt a visit by John Tay. In 1886 Tay, as a self-supporting missionary, made his way to the island on a British man-of-war and remained five weeks, convincing the islanders to observe Saturday instead of Sunday. On his return to the United States, he asked for a minister to accompany him back to the island so that the population could be baptized and a church organized. Elder Andrew Cudney agreed to meet Tay in Tahiti, and together they would proceed to Pitcairn. Cudney chose to sail via Hawaii but then found it impossible to connect with a boat going anywhere near Tahiti. A local church member in Hawaii purchased a small vessel for his use, and a crew of six were enlisted to take him to Tahiti. They left Honolulu on July 31, 1888, but were tragically lost at sea. In 1891 what was thought to be the wreckage of the boat was reported found on Tahitian shores.

The loss of Cudney was a devastating blow. He had written on the day of departure that “it does seem that God’s hand is in the work.” Church administration determined that any further plans to reach Pitcairn would be very carefully scrutinized, well-funded, and meticulously executed. A larger boat was commissioned to be built in California, the contract stipulating that no construction work was to be done during Sabbath hours, and Tay was to monitor every piece of wood included in its structure. A copper bottom was attached to protect it from marine worm infestation. It was launched on July 28, 1890, a “dry” launch without champagne but with plenty of sandwiches, cakes, and ice-cream. She was named Pitcairn.4

Six Pitcairn Voyages

The Pitcairn sailed from Oakland, California, on October 20, 1890, arriving at Pitcairn Island on November 25. Tay and his wife, Hannah, Read and Hattie Read and Edward and Ida Gates all disembarked for three weeks. Read and Gates baptized 64 candidates on Friday, December 5, and organized the Pitcairn Island Church two days later as well as a tract and missionary society. Eighteen more candidates were baptized before the group sailed westward to other Pacific Islands. Pitcairn Islanders James McCoy and his sister Mary, together with Heywood Christian, joined the ship to assist in further enterprises. On the boat’s homeward voyage in 1892, Edward and Ida Gates were left at Pitcairn Island to nurture the church members.

The 1893 voyage of the Pitcairn, its second, brought the schoolteacher Hattie Andre to the island to assist Edward and Ida Gates. The third voyage, in 1894, carried self-supporting missionaries W. S. Buckner and his wife, Rosa, to replace Edward and Ida Gates. Buckner was primarily engaged in building a clean water supply and a windmill to turn a lathe and grind corn.

The fourth voyage of the Pitcairn, in 1895, brought Edwin and Florence Butz to assist Andre. Alfred Young was taken on board to enable him to attend college in America and broaden his understanding of SDA mission. When the Pitcairn visited on its fifth voyage, in 1896, the five missionaries joined the ship, leaving Jonathan and Sophia Whatley as replacements. The Buckners sailed as far as Tahiti and then took a commercial steamer to California because they suffered so badly with sea-sickness on the smaller craft. Andre went as far as Samoa and, similarly, found passage back home to America.

The Whatleys were resident for 12 months before a crime occurred that dramatically hindered the momentum of the mission. Harry Albert Christian murdered his partner, Julia Warren, and their infant daughter, Eleanor, on June 19, 1897, and tossed their bodies into the sea. Christian was tried on Pitcairn Island and taken to Fiji, where he was hanged on October 8, 1898. The tragic episode sent shock waves through Adventism. They questioned how a Christian community, touted as reformed individuals and faithful churchgoers, could fall so spectacularly. The secular press alleged that the Pitcairn Islanders were morally depraved and imbecilic because of in-breeding. Gates was prompted to defend their character in church magazines. The Whatleys left the island after the trial. The next sailing of the Pitcairn was delayed until January 1899. Gates went with the ship and remained on the island for three weeks, conducting revival meetings, a baptism, and the election of church elders, knowing that the Pitcairn was to be withdrawn from service. For the next decade, the church members were left chiefly to their own leadership at a time when they desperately needed experienced spiritual nurturing.

Local Leadership

To their credit, the Pitcairn Islanders, in general, maintained their faith under the guidance of their elder, James McCoy. However, Gates made no mention of Pitcairn Island in his 1906 mission report. Meanwhile, Andre’s school had lapsed, but the church members toiled long on a new church building, a two-storied structure of tough miro (Pacific rosewood) wood. Benjamin Cady visited from Tahiti in June 1907 to visit among the members and dedicate their new church. The upstairs section would be used for church services and downstairs was fitted for an elementary school. Cady was accompanied by Mark Carey, a young Australian teacher transferring from Rarotonga to revive the school enterprise.

Indifferent Progress

Carey began his school with an enrollment of 76, but student enthusiasm faded, and within 12 months only 41 students were attending morning classes, and 7 attended in the afternoon session. In 1908 the Tahitian Mission purchased a schooner, the Tiare, to sail between the islands in their territory, including Pitcairn Island. It provided better communication and a means of getting the Pitcairn products of arrowroot and curios to Tahitian markets.

In 1890 Heywood Christian, joined the ship to assist in further enterprises. On the boat’s homeward voyage in 1892, Edward and Ida Gates were left at Pitcairn Island to nurture the church members.
However, Frank Lyndon, director of the Society Islands Mission, complained in his 1910 report that the commercial interests of Pitcairn Island and the costs and maintenance of the Tiare were absorbing all his time. The schooner was sold soon after. A further setback was experienced in September 1911 when a hurricane ripped through the island, destroying houses and crops.

When Carey transferred in late 1912, the islanders were left without a teacher. He was replaced by Richard and Miriam Adams, both nursing graduates who took eight months to find a ship to take them to Pitcairn Island via Mangapea in the Tuamotu group. Miriam was so fearful when disembarking the ship that two Pitcairn Islanders had to carry her down the rope ladder into the long boat that was heaving so badly in rough seas that they had to be rowed to the sheltered side of the island.

The Messenger

After the sale of the *Tiare* the Pitcairn Islanders decided to build their own boat. Beginning in December 1915 they constructed a bark they named the *Messenger*. On January 15, 1917, ten men, including Adams, set out on its maiden trading voyage to Tahiti via Mangareva. They had no chronometer or charts and very primitive ideas of navigation. For two days, a hurricane drove them off target in mountainous seas whipped up into foam. They limped into Tahiti with very little fresh water left. They offered the boat for use throughout the Eastern Polynesian Mission, but Lyndon would have nothing to do with it. Still courting tragedy, they took on another 10 passengers, including 3 children, for the homeward leg. They battled head winds for three days before returning to Tahiti with their foresail shredded. Charitable people in port refitted and resupplied the boat, and it set off a week later. It took one month to reach Pitcairn Island. They had been away for 18 weeks, and they had been given up for lost at sea, their relatives imagining they had suffered a fate similar to that of Cudney. Miraculously, their lives were spared. The high-risk enterprise was well-intentioned but ended in failure. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 began a better era for Pitcairn, causing a greater number of ships to pause off shore and trade fruit and curios for clothing and fuel oil.

Sporadic Nurture

Adams took furlough in October 1917 and transferred elsewhere. Pitcairn Islanders Fred Christian and Walter Young assumed leadership in the church and school respectively, and the island was incorporated into the Eastern Polynesian Mission. For the next two decades, the church membership was usually left in the hands of lay leadership, broken by an occasional residency of expatriate assistance.

In January 1924 Rosalind Young returned from New Zealand to Pitcairn with her husband David Nield, a Church of God minister. Rosalind passed away a few days after arrival. The Eastern Polynesian Mission became aware of Nield’s influence and quickly appointed an experienced pastor, Robert Hare, and his wife, Henrietta, to spend six months shepherding the members. Nield took the same boat back to New Zealand on which the Hares arrived on March 31, 1924. Hare later reported that the Pitcairners had resisted Nield’s efforts to dissuade them of Adventism.

Edwin and Florence Butz returned for a brief few months, arriving on February 14, 1929. They reported a membership of 187 with almost full attendance at their first Sabbath services. During their stay, Edwin baptized an additional 25 candidates.

In June 1933 William and Louisa Smith transferred from Tasmania to Pitcairn Island for 12 months before returning to New Zealand.

Regular Support

On July 3, 1938, Frederick and Myrtle Ward arrived at Pitcairn Island, marking the beginning of a long succession of expatriate support for the church members. Ward proved to be a capable schoolteacher and spiritual leader. Nurse Evelyn Totenhofer was appointed in late 1943 to supplement their ministry. She later married Pitcairn Islander Leonard Elwyn Christian. During the Second World War years, ships called infrequently, at times causing shortages of food staples such as flour and sugar. The island population numbered 170, almost all of them Sabbath School members. The Wards completed their first six years of residency and took furlough in August 1944. Don and Una Watson had arrived in December 1943 in anticipation of the Wards’ departure. Watson initiated meetings for the young people and also conducted baptismal classes, the first since Smith’s 1933 residency. The Watsons remained until mid-1946, but the Wards didn’t arrive to replace them until 1947 because of difficulties finding passage on a ship. Their second residency extended to October 5, 1951, when they returned to Australia and retired.

The post–Second World War years witnessed increasing emigration from Pitcairn, significantly reducing population numbers and church membership totals. A peak was reached in 1956 with the island population at 120 and church membership at 113. Six decades later, the population had collapsed to 66, and the church membership numbered only 22. Those who served as resident mission directors until 1980 were Norman and Rubina Ferris (1953–1955), Lester and Freda Hawkes (1956–1958), Rex and Winsome Cobbin (1959–1960), Don and Ellen Davies (1961–1963), Walter and Christina Ferris (1964–1965, 1967–1969), Leslie and Enid Webster (1966, 1972–1973), Alfred and Marjorie Parker (1969–1971), John and Doris Dever (1974–1976), and Wallace and Phyllis Ferguson (1977–1979). One of the highlights of this era was the formation of a Pitcairn Island brass band of sorts. Under the baton of Lester Hawkes, the group included four cornets, a tenor horn, a trombone, an improvised trombone
constructed on the island, a very battered B-flat bass, and a double bass made of a tea chest and fishing line.52

A Return to American Missionaries

American church members maintained a steadfast interest in the Pitcairn mission. The early saga of mass baptisms on a faraway subtropical island possessed the elements of an arcadian heaven, lingering in their minds as an idyllic place for ministry. Some volunteered their services. Those with nursing qualifications were especially useful in view of the fact that Evelyn Totenhofer had passed away in 1977 after 34 years of service on the island. For this reason, Oliver and Yvona Stimpson, known as Ollie and Von, sailed from San Francisco on August 22, 1979, arriving at Pitcairn late in the year after having to make a circuitous trip via Sydney.59 They served two residencies, late 1979 through 1981 and 1986 through 1987.60 Von worked as the medical officer on the island. Another American couple, Thurman Petty Jr. and his wife, Martha, sailed from Los Angeles on November 15, 1981, to relieve the Stimpsons. They remained until 1983, Martha providing her nursing skills.64

More Australasian Missionaries


Court Cases

In 1999 an islander told a visiting British policewoman she had been sexually abused. Further investigations led to multiple criminal charges being laid in 2004 against 13 Pitcairn men. The high-profile cases, like the 1897 crime of Harry Christian, shocked the worldwide SDA community and brought significant disrepute to the Pitcairn Island church members because the public media blackened everyone with the same broad brush. The smears gathered traction when a few Pitcairn women testified in defense of those charged, claiming the conduct was not rape but a part of their culture. The sad saga generated deep-seated animosities between the island families.76 Shame was added to mortification when the island’s mayor, a Pitcairn elder in the church, was convicted in 2016 of possessing child pornography in his computer.77

Future Prospects

In the wake of the court cases, the condition of the Pitcairn Island church community looked grim, and attendees at services dwindled to a handful. Nevertheless, church leaders at the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference office are sponsoring pastors to visit for brief residencies until a suitable couple is found to minister to the members on a long-term basis, preferably one or both of the individuals having nursing experience. In 2018, Jean-Noel Adeline spent a few weeks conducting revival meetings for the islanders, culminating in a baptism of five people and families forgiving each other for past acrimony. Regular Sabbath attendance at services has recovered to almost 40 attendees. From a community in crisis, it is said to “have become a community united” once more.78 The Pitcairn Island church is now attached to the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference and administered directly from that office.79 The address is PO Box 24, Pitcairn Island.

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