



Antriol church in the 1960s.

Photo courtesy of Dutch Caribbean Union Mission archives.

Bonaire

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Lea M. Bernabela was born on the island of Curacao and grew up in Bonaire. She is the daughter of Serviliano Bernabela and Josephine Bernabela-Watson. She was an active member in Bonaire, and contributed to the the development of the church in Bonaire in the 1950s-1970s. She worked as a teacher and later school principal of the only public school on the island.

Bonaire is a small island located in the Caribbean Sea to the north of Venezuela.¹ It has a total area of 294 square kilometers (114 square miles) and a population of 20,104 as of January 2019. The official language is Dutch, and the recognized regional language is Papiamentu. The currency is the US dollar.² Bonaire is a part of

the ABC islands that consist of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao.

The island was owned by various countries before it finally became a Dutch colony. Bonaire was conquered in 1636, and, in 1639, Fort Oranje was built.³ Fort Oranje is still used in modern days. The courtroom is located in that building. It used to be a police station in the 60s and 70s and served as a harbor office.

Bonaire, along with Curaçao, Aruba, Saba, Saint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten, was a part of the Netherlands Antilles until October 2010, when Bonaire became a special municipality of the Netherlands.⁴

Bonaire has a warm, dry (though humid) and windy climate. Average annual rainfall is 20.5 inches (520 mm), most of which occurs in October through January. Bonaire lies outside the hurricane belt, though its weather and oceanic conditions are occasionally affected by hurricanes and tropical storms.⁵

Although they were referred to as *Islas Inútiles* ("Useless Islands"), Bonaire was very useful during WWII. During the German occupation of the Netherlands during World War II, Bonaire was a protectorate of Britain and the United States. The American army built the Flamingo Airport as an air force base. After Germany invaded the Netherlands on May 10, 1940, many German and Austrian citizens were interned in a camp on Bonaire for the war's duration.⁶

In 2013 religion in Bonaire was predominantly Roman Catholic (68 percent), and there were also Protestant minorities. There is a Mormon church on the island, as well as an Islamic center on Bonaire.⁷

The island is served by the Bonaire International Airport, also known as the Flamingo International Airport, which is located at the southern border of Kralendijk. Several American airlines offer nonstop flights from Newark, Houston, Atlanta, and Miami, so American travelers can reach Bonaire easily. Regional airlines also operate flights between Bonaire and other Caribbean islands.⁸

Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bonaire

Cornelius Martin was born in 1749 and became a preacher-farmer in Bonaire. He and others taught people about the second coming of Christ. His grandchild, Eustacia Felida, later became one of the first Seventh-day Adventists in Bonaire.⁹ From the official beginning of the church work in 1942 up to 2016, Bonaire was part of the Netherlands Antilles Mission and, later, Curaçao Conference. This means that all the documentation about Bonaire in that time period is archived in Curaçao Conference.

In the beginning of the church work in Bonaire, the people that were baptized were not highly educated; they were farmers, fishermen, merchants, and manual workers. Consequently, little was documented in writing; instead, everything was passed down orally. As elders chaired church board meetings, the minutes would be written, but no historic or memorable occurrences were documented. Most of what is currently known was passed down to the children of the first members of the church. The movement's growth is documented in

interviews and conversations with the current brethren of the church.¹⁰

Pioneers

In early 1932, Brother José Lancrey started the work in Rincon in a store he had rented from Johannes Ellis. He wrapped a tract into every package of goods he sold. He got many people interested and began to study with them. People had to hide to read the Bible in that time since the Catholic Church discouraged its members from reading the Bible.¹¹ He even gained the interest of two young ladies, Maria and Ursula Ellis, who would later marry Elder Roa and Brother Enrique Elisabeth. After that, Brother Lancrey returned to Curaçao.

Even though the Adventist message had been preached in Bonaire since 1932, the first baptism on the island took place on May 24, 1941.¹² Six people were baptized: Evarista and Lourens Felida, Hilda Sophia, Roberto Anthony, Pedro Thomas, and Margarita Coffie.¹³ These members were granted fellowship at the Mundu Nobo Church in Curaçao because the brethren who worked in Bonaire were from that church in Curaçao, and there was no church organized in Bonaire at the time. After this first baptism, José Lancrey, Domingo Martin, and Rafael Anthony went to work in Bonaire. Elder Leon Gardiner officiated the first Seventh-day Adventist wedding in Bonaire, that of José Lancrey and Catharina Jansen, which took place on September 9, 1941.¹⁴

Elder Gardiner kept working hard in Bonaire with dedicated members to establish a church. The church was organized on March 21, 1942, with 22 members. Twelve of these members transferred from Mundo Nobo Church to the newly-established church in Bonaire.¹⁵ They were José Lancrey, Catharina Lancrey, Roberto Anthony, Margarita Coffie, Lourens Felida, Evarista Felida, Simona Pieters, Mr. and Mrs. Domingo Martin, Margaritha Sendar, Hilda Amelia-Sophia, and Pedro Thomas. All this resulted from the commitment of Elder Gardiner, who worked within the three ABC islands. He also baptized Serviliano Bernabela, who lived in Aruba in 1942. In December 1951, Bernabela arrived in Bonaire and became a prominent member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Antriol in Bonaire. For a long time, he led the church in absence of a pastor while serving as treasurer for over 40 years.¹⁶

Spreading the Message

The history of the Adventist Church in Bonaire recognizes many elders and pastors for their work on the island. They all arrived from other countries because Bonaire didn't have native ministers or pastors. As the native language of Bonaire is Papiamentu, and as most of the native population didn't speak many languages, translations into Papiamentu were necessary for all the preaching and sermons. Serviliano Bernabela, better known as Brother Miano, did all the translations from English and Spanish to Papiamentu. Brother Bernabela was married to Mrs. Josephine Bernabela-Watson, a Surinam lady, who spoke mostly Dutch and a little English, so he also translated for the Dutch pastors who visited the island. Although all the pastors who visited didn't speak the native language, communication was possible through translation. The message could then spread

among the inhabitants of the island. Brother Bernabela received much recognition from the conference for his work.¹⁷

Another important person in Adventist history in Bonaire was Brother Enrique Elisabeth, a colporteur whose wife was originally from Bonaire. He did groundbreaking work as a colporteur, selling his books from door to door through the 1950s. His marriage to a native of Rincon made opening doors in a predominantly Catholic population slightly easier.¹⁸

Many elders, ministers, and pastors offered their services in Bonaire. Presidents and employees of the mission and conference also visited, including Una Creighton, a secretary-treasurer who would audit the treasury books, followed by Brothers Romero and T. Newball. Names of presidents who visited included Christensen, Hooker, Brinkman, Grep, and Duffis, among others.¹⁹

Well-known families in the 50s and 60s included Lourens Felida, Bernardo Frans, Antolino Frans, Hilda Amelia, Bernardo Thielman, Ernesto Flanders, Serviliano Bernabela, Jan Thielman-Levenstone, Franselina Winklaar, Willy Roo, Carlos Janga, Wilmo Winklaar, Santiago Emerenciana, Mathias Morillo, Beaumont, Evertsz, and Martis among others. It was a close-knit group of families who were all members of one church in Antriol. All of these families knew this church building as Antriol Church.²⁰

During Pastor Roa's time working in Antriol Church around 1961, another church was built in Rincon, and several of the group who had worshipped in Antriol Church became members of the church in Rincon. Three Felida families and the Bernabela and Morillo families went to the Rincon church with a few other families. The church was organized, and these families transferred to Rincon Church. After Pastor Roa left and Pastor Alferez arrived in Bonaire, the brethren in Rincon were committed to spreading the Adventist faith, and a few Rincon natives were baptized. Rincon Church was the first church in Bonaire with a baptistry.²¹ In 1966, according to available information, Bonaire had 60 church members.

In 2017, Bonaire Mission was established as a part of Dutch Caribbean Union Mission. The first president of Bonaire Mission was Pastor Suandy Selassa.²²

Past Historic Accounts of Bonaire Church

Some points of interest regarding the church in Bonaire were found in the archives of Curaçao Conference's board minutes. On January 17, 1994, a vote was taken to eliminate the conference's old documents that had been damaged due to a flood at Marigotweg 14, where the conference had moved after leaving de Ruyterkade.²³ Eliminating those documents meant the loss of the conference's older history. What was salvaged included facts and decisions made on behalf of Bonaire within six volumes of votes between 1984-2011.

Volume 1: 1984-1987

February 14, 1984 – voted to use fl. 6,200.00 ANG to finish the sport complex in Bonaire.²⁴ In May, another fl. 10,000.00 ANG was voted to use for this purpose.

March 15, 1984 – voted “SEDECA” (*Sentro Deportivo y Cultural Adventista*) as the new name for the sport complex.²⁵

In 1984, the baptism goal for Bonaire was ten, four in Rincon and six in Antriol.

November 20, 1984 – voted to change the ingathering month of Bonaire to May instead of December, as was the case for Curaçao.²⁶

Volume 2: 1988-1991

1988 – Bonaire had 108 members, 73 in Antriol and 35 in Rincon.²⁷

January 20, 1991 – voted to buy two houses that Brother Roberto Wout from Aruba had offered to the church for fl. 145,000.00 ANG. That property became the location of *Radio Adventista Bonaire* and an IADPA bookstore in one building and a second building for the *Iglesia Adventista Nikiboko*. They are known as Kaya Pos di Amor 1A and 1B.²⁸

1991 – Bonaire had 136 members, 92 in Antriol and 44 in Rincon. These members only include baptized members registered in the books. The author remembers many children in the church membership at that time since families used to have many children, leading to experiences of much bigger groups.

June 25, 1991 – voted to contribute fl. 10,000.00 ANG in aid of the construction of the new Rincon church. The old church building had been in such bad shape and was not built well, so a new one was deemed necessary.²⁹ Two merchant friends, Roberto Wout from Aruba and Serviliano Bernabela from Bonaire, were crucial in the construction of this new church, contributing money, and labor, and supervision of the work. Wout sent money, and Bernabela sought workers. Where necessary, he also financed whatever was needed. Notification had to be sent to Curaçao for surveying to take place, for which they had to await approval. Many times, these surveys took longer than necessary because of this.³⁰

Volume 3: 1992-1995

February 20, 1992 – voted to fix the house at Kaya Pos di Amor, Bonaire, for the price of fl. 5,000.00 ANG.³¹

July 1992 – a youth camporee was held in Bonaire.³²

September 25-30, 1992 – in response to a request from the mayor of Bonaire, the church offered a program against alcoholism.³³

January 17, 1994 – voted to eliminate the old documents that were damaged due to a flood that flooded the offices at Marigotweg 14. With this, a large portion of the history of the churches on the ABC islands was lost.

1994 – voted to approve building plans for the new Rincon church for an approximate amount of fl. 210,000.00 ANG.³⁴

November 23, 1994 – 15 members of the Nikiboko group were accepted as members of the conference church. With this, Bonaire had two churches and one group.³⁵

February 22, 1995 – Brother Janchi Zink from Curaçao was given fl. 7,000.00 ANG to fix the conference house in Bonaire.³⁶

Volume 4: 1996-2000

No information about Bonaire could be retrieved.

Volume 5: 2001-2006

June 9, 2002 – voted to authorize “Adventist World Radio” to establish a support relationship to the OMEGA 2 station and other radio stations of Bonaire.³⁷

November 30, 2003 – voted for the creation of two groups: the “Tera Cora” group with 23 people and the “Hispanos” group with 22 people.³⁸

March 14, 2004 – voted to give fl. 2,000.00 ANG to Bonaire to prepare for the dedication of the Rincon church, which took place in 2004.³⁹

Volume 6: 2007-2012

2009 – During the Netherlands Antilles Conference’s quadrennial session, it was reported that Bonaire had 313 members, two churches, and three groups.⁴⁰

September 29, 2009 – voted to use fl. 9,403.71 ANG from the conference house’s fund to remodel the conference house at Kaya Pos di Amor 1.⁴¹

November 17, 2018 – the Antriol Bonaire Church opened after a renovation in 2017-2018.

Currently, Bonaire is the territory of Bonaire Mission, which has Pastor Surrandy Selassa as its president and is a part of the Dutch Caribbean Union Mission. The rededication took place in May 2018.

Church Presence in the Community

In 1954, the first mission-wide Missionary Volunteers camp was held in Bonaire. In July 1992, a youth camporee was held in Bonaire. The church's youth currently make a positive impact through their programs in the community.

The church's outreach programs, such as the one against alcoholism, create awareness of the church in the community.

In 2011, an organized and well-attended pathfinders' camporee took place in Bonaire, providing opportunities for the youth to engage in safe and healthy activities while making friends for life.

The work of ADRA in Bonaire has been breaking prejudices as ADRA distributes food from its pantry to the needy in the community.⁴²

As the political development on Bonaire was quiet and not violent, its effect on the Seventh-day Adventist work was positive and did not interfere in the growth and development of the work of the church. Bonaire is a quite difficult field just because it is such a small community.

The Adventist church has a respected place in the community. In the last few years, its position has been strengthened by the activities of ADRA, the Adventist bookstore, and, more recently, *Radio Adventista Bonaire*, reaching the population in their native language.

One of the big challenges Bonaire currently faces is a shift in the population. After the change in political structure, Dutch people have migrated to Bonaire. Although Dutch is the official language, not much Adventist material exists in Dutch to share with the Dutch-speaking people of Bonaire, which creates a language barrier.

Church Accountability

The church in Bonaire is well established with duly elected church boards, church treasurers, and church secretaries to properly conduct business. Larger administrative meetings and activities take place on the island of Curaçao. Administrators from Curaçao Conference audit the books of the churches of Bonaire on an annual basis.⁴³

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NOTES

1. There are few documents about the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bonaire. The author grew up in this church in Bonaire but had not realized that so little had been documented about the development of the church. This article is written based on the book, "Legacy of Faith," by Daniel A. Duffis; in the minutes of the Curaçao Conference; in conversations with older church members; and from the author's personal experiences as an active member and teacher in Bonaire.
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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

7. "Over 80 percent of Caribbean Netherlands populations are religious," *CBS.nl*, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2014/51/over-80-percent-of-caribbean-netherlands-population-are-religious>.
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12. Venezuelan Mission office of the secretariat archives.
13. Duffis, 64.
14. *Ibid.*, 65.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Lea M. Bernabela, personal knowledge as an active member and teacher in Bonaire.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Netherlands Antilles Conference committee, January 17, 1994, Curaçao Conference archives.
24. "Netherlands Antilles Conference archives, volume 1: 1984-1987," February 14, 1984, Curaçao Conference archives.
25. *Ibid.*, March 1984.

26. Ibid., November 1984.
27. "Netherlands Antilles Conference archives, volume 2: 1988-1991," 1988, Curaçao Conference archives.
28. Ibid., January 20, 1991.
29. Ibid., June 25, 1991.
30. Lea M. Bernabela, personal knowledge as an active member and teacher in Bonaire.
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32. Ibid., July 1992.
33. Ibid., September 25, 1992.
34. Ibid., 1994.
35. Ibid., November 23, 1994.
36. Ibid., February 22, 1995.
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38. Ibid., November 30, 2003.
39. Ibid., March 14, 2004.
40. Netherlands quadrennial session, September 29, 2009, Curaçao Conference archives.
41. Ibid.
42. Lea M. Bernabela, personal knowledge as an active member and teacher in Bonaire.
43. Ibid.

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