Early Adventist Missionaries in the Caribbean

NAOMI MODEST, AND GLENN O. PHILLIPS

Naomi Modest

Glenn O. Phillips, Ph.D. (Howard University, Washington, D.C.), although retired, is actively writing, researching, lecturing, and publishing. He was a professor at Morgan State University, Howard University, and the University of the Southern Caribbean. He has authored and published numerous articles, book reviews, and books, including
The eastern Caribbean comprised of the numerous Leeward and Windward Islands, were among the early places outside of the U.S.A. that Seventh-day Adventist missionaries labored in significant numbers, for around eighty years. “The English-speaking regions of the Caribbean were the first to attract Adventist workers.”

Adventist missionaries began to arrive in the eastern Caribbean during late 1880s, and after that in increasing numbers. They were sponsored by the Church’s Foreign Board and the International Tract Society. The missionaries were responding to numerous letters of invitation for Adventist literature and persons to teach them about the Adventist faith. For over seventy years, Adventist missionaries played critical roles in the establishment of the evangelistic and administrative operations and growth of the church, until the mid-1960s when Caribbean Adventists began to serve in most leadership positions. While Caribbean Adventist workers existed from the early years, the majority of workers including colporteurs, medical workers, ministers, teachers, and administrators were predominately American missionaries as was the practice around the world at that time.

Among the first missionaries to the Caribbean in the mid to late 1880s were two Adventist literature evangelists (colporteurs), George A. King and William Arnold sent out by the International Tract Society and later by the Foreign Mission Board. They sold hundreds of books and magazines throughout this region from Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana) in the south to the Danish West Indies (the U.S. Virgin Islands) in the north. Two prominent Adventist leaders, John N. Loughborough and Stephen N. Haskell supported these efforts. In 1887, the first Adventist Church in the Caribbean was established in Georgetown by George King and G. E. Rupert.

By the early 1890s, the Foreign Board began sending visiting ministers to the Lesser Antilles in response to the frequent and persistent call of interested readers of Adventist literature for an minister to baptize those who began to follow the teachings of Adventism. F. B. Grant, an American literature evangelist was the first missionary to visit Trinidad in 1893.

Among the other early ministers was Dexter A. Ball who went to Antigua and Barbados where they held evangelistic services and baptized the first Seventh-day Adventists in both British Caribbean colonies in 1890. Other Adventist missionaries were working in the vast Caribbean region from the Bahamas to the coast of Panama, Costa Rica, British Honduras (now Belize) and many Caribbean islands off the coast of Central America. American missionaries also arrived and established health treatment clinics in a number of the major ports of these colonies where there were Adventist churches.

During the mid-1890s resident Adventist ministers and their families began to be appointed to serve across the region. They established the first network of congregations and the first church buildings in the Caribbean. The first SDA conferences in the Caribbean came in 1903, with the creation of the Jamaica Conference and the East Caribbean conference when Elder William A. Spicer, the new General Conference Secretary visited these areas.

The growing number of Adventist missionaries faced numerous obstacles over the decades that they served in the Caribbean. Among their experiences was death from various tropical diseases including malaria, yellow fever, and typhoid fever. One of the earliest to die was A. E. Flowers, the first Adventist minister to serve in Trinidad, who died from yellow fever in July 1895, within a year of his arrival. Others included Pastor L. M. Crowther who after holding multiple Bible crusades in the towns of San Fernando and Tunapuna in Trinidad, died soon after of malaria fever in 1901. Six years later, in 1907, Charles Enoch died of yellow fever and the following year R. L. Price also of yellow fever. In 1911, Elder Ovid E. Davis who worked for years among the Aboriginal people in the interior forest of British Guiana (now Guyana) died of “an attack of the dreaded black water fever” surrounded by his converts.

Nevertheless, Adventist missionaries served joyfully and faithfully in the Caribbean. One long serving missionary, Elmer E. Andross, who was the first president of the Inter-American Division (1922-1936) referred to being involved in missionary service as “a joy of service.” He once wrote, “…the advancement of the mission cause is not only our duty and responsibility, but it is an enjoyment which those who have once tasted would not exchange for all the treasures of the Indian mines.”

Most of the church leaders valued the equally dedicated services of Caribbean Adventist church workers. Consequently, they began from the early years to train the Caribbean converts to be colporteurs and later ministers. They specifically established boarding schools in Jamaica, Panama, and Trinidad for this purpose.

Another early missionary to the Caribbean was James E. Patterson, a Vincentian immigrant to the United States who became the first colporteur sent by the Adventist Foreign Board from San Francisco to Jamaica in 1894. Other Caribbean Adventist workers included Charles Adamson, pioneer worker to Trinidad, James Brathwaite to Barbados, Tobago and British Guiana, James Dasent to St. Vincent, and Wilbert Forde to St. Kitts and Nevis.

Not all Adventist missionaries were literature evangelists and clergy. Many of them operated health clinics prior to the turn of the twentieth century. There were also nurses, medical doctors, evangelists, printers, and educators. They all experienced various challenges ranging from adapting to the tropical climate, strange food, travel, and housing arrangements, as well as difficulties in dealing with hostile Sunday keeping clergy and uncooperative government officials.

With the beginning of the organizational structure of the church, many were appointed from 1897, as leaders and
administrators of the missions, conferences and unions, and from 1922, of the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Most of the missionaries serving in the Caribbean were American-born, but also included individuals from Britain, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. Beginning in the late 1930s, a small percentage of Caribbean-born workers began to occupy some positions that were traditionally held primarily by the Church’s large missionary contingent.

It was in the mid-1960s when there was a significant increase of qualified Caribbean-born Adventist clergy, teachers, and other support staff employed by and within the various unions across the Caribbean. These were graduates of the Adventist Caribbean training colleges in Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and Trinidad. The continued effectiveness of these workers including administrators, educators, evangelists, pastors, and medical workers was demonstrated by their increased evangelistic and educational success. The growing cost of supporting American based missionaries and the declining need for such workers, indicated that it would have been ineffective to continue this practice. Floyd Greenleaf noted that by 1966, even at the level of the Inter-American Division, Caribbean administrators were filling the highest administrative positions across the Caribbean. He identified, Elder Bender L. Archbold, a veteran Caribbean administrator as being appointed “the first native worker” to be the division secretary. Additionally the new financially self-supporting existence of an increasing number of conferences and unions in the region, demonstrated that the Caribbean region had reached fiscal maturity.

During the mid-1960s, the indirect influence of what was unfolding across the wider Caribbean political world—the embrace of Caribbean nationalism that led to the political independence of a number of countries—began to have an effect on who would hold leadership positions in the respective area churches. Consequently, and gradually, fewer missionaries were needed to serve in most areas of the Caribbean. Among the last American missionaries to serve in leadership roles within the Caribbean Union Conference, headquartered in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, were Elders James G. Fuller as president and K. W. Whitney who served as secretary/treasurer from 1961-1966; and lastly G. O. Adams who served as president from 1967 until 1970.

**SOURCES**


**NOTES**


8. James, 190.


