

St. Vincent and the Grenadines Mission

DERMOTH BAPTISTE

Dermoth Baptiste

St. Vincent and the Grenadines Mission (formerly part of East Caribbean Conference) is part of Caribbean Union Conference in the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines Mission covers Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Its headquarters is in Kingstown, St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Statistics (June 30, 2019): Churches, 39; membership, 16,069; population, 111,000.¹

Beginning of Adventist Work

It is believed that the Seventh-day Adventist message was first introduced to a family in the rural community of Coulls Hill on the leeward side of the island around the year 1895. This family would have heard the distinctiveness of Adventism from relatives in Trinidad and became convinced that God was “raising up a new generation of believers” who would be faithful to Him and obedient to His commandments. They accepted the message and began practicing the Adventist lifestyle.

From Coulls Hill the message was taken across the mountain ridge to Park Hill, another rural community on the windward side of the island, where it was shared and gladly received by the Latchman family. Meanwhile, as providence would have it, reading tracts were left at Port Kingstown in which the Seventh-day Sabbath was highlighted from scripture as the day of corporate worship, in recognition of God as Creator of the world. Thus began the reading, practicing, and sharing of “Present Truth” from which a nucleus of early believers came together on Sabbaths in Kingstown for worship and fellowship.

In 1897, St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) was considered an entity of the West Indies Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. In 1898, a Barbadian colporteur named Willis Hackett played a significant role in the introduction of the message to St. Vincent. Not much is known of what transpired between 1898 and 1901. However, on October 16, 1901, Elder E. Van Deusen and his wife sailed from Michigan, United States of America and became the first foreign missionaries to land in St. Vincent. Immediately they began to fan the flames and consolidate the fledging group of believers. Baptisms were held and so begun the first Seventh-day Adventist Church congregation on the island.²

There was the immediate need for a meeting place and so the first chapel was built at Old Montrose on a parcel of land made available by the Eustace family. The building was dedicated to the honour and glory of God on July 12, 1902. The first musical instrument, namely an organ for the island church was purchased and also dedicated at the same time.

In 1903, the East Caribbean Conference was established in Trinidad and Tobago and St. Vincent and the Grenadines became part of its configuration. In 1906, the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Caribbean was further re-organised, with the East Caribbean Conference moving to Barbados. The South Caribbean Conference, which comprised the countries of Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines was created.³

Pastor J. G. Dasant who arrived in St. Vincent on June 12, 1907, was the first assigned minister by the General Conference to the island. The process of evangelization was aggressive as the message was taking root and began spreading beyond Kingstown to other communities.⁴

In 1910, the message was introduced to Bequia by a lady named Ellen Riggard, who left Trinidad as a Seventh-day Adventist convert to attend a funeral in Bequia. In 1920, the message was taken to Union Island by a native, Enos Ambrose who accepted it in Barbados, and shared it with his community. The first church structure was built on that Grenadine island in 1941. The last of the Grenadine islands to receive the message was Canouan in 1954. A group of local missionaries from Union Island headed by John Ambrose was responsible for evangelizing the island.⁵

Events that Led to the Development of the Mission

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the work mushroomed and spread rapidly in the Marriacqua Valley, and the Windward and Leeward communities. Active laymen, as they embraced the message, were radiating with joy and delight to share the "Good News" with holy compulsion. Many had to traverse long and dangerous terrain as they moved from one community to the other with the message of God's saving grace. As a result of this evangelistic drive, large concentrations of churches were established in the Marriacqua basin. This has continued into the 21st century, as the Living Streams Seventh-day Adventist church, located at La Croix was dedicated to the honour and glory of God on Sunday, March 20, 2011.⁶

As a component to the philosophy of Adventism, Christian education was introduced in the 1940s and 50s and later in the 1980s as follows: Richland Park SDA Primary 1945, Bequia SDA Primary 1951, Bequia SDA Secondary 1953, Mountain View Adventist Academy 1958, and Leeward SDA School 1980.

Medical Missionary work was introduced as another element of the philosophy of Adventism with the establishment of a dental clinic in 1972. Dr. Douglas Robertson, missionary dentist from the United States, was the force behind the opening of the clinic and served as its first resident dentist.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines enjoyed a special relationship with the South Caribbean Conference for 70 years until the Caribbean Union was restructured in 1976, with the creation of the North Caribbean Conference. St Vincent and the Grenadines was realigned to the new East Caribbean Conference, headquartered in Barbados.⁷ Glenn Phillips provides confirmation of this significant event and comments on its significance in his book, *Over A Century of Adventism 1884-1991*.⁸

In 1954, two buildings were leased in Kingstown and Fountain respectively from the Church of Scotland which saw declining membership and eventual closure. Agreed upon in the lease was that these buildings be sold to the church at the end of the lease agreement for a token cost of one pound. These buildings have been extensively expanded and refurbished and now house two of the thriving congregations.

The church was first incorporated on May 11, 1938 and this was later amended by an act of Parliament on the September 29, 2009. It was further amended in 2013, and is now legally known as "The Seventh-day Adventist Church, St. Vincent and the Grenadines Mission." It has the power to acquire and dispose of property.⁹

For the first seventy-five years of its existence, the church was pastored and supervised by one resident expatriate minister at the time. With the alignment under the new East Caribbean Conference, four pastoral districts were organized. On January 15, 1979, Pastor Aaron Stephen became the first indigenous pastor to serve in his country.¹⁰

In April 1976, a layman, Dermoth Baptiste, a school teacher who subsequently became a Seventh-day Adventist minister, was the first lay preacher to baptize over one hundred persons in a single crusade and resulted in a new congregation being established. This was the layman's first crusade and consolidated his motivation to prepare for full time Gospel ministry. Subsequent to that historic crusade, a five-acre plot of land was purchased on which is housed the Belmont Seventh-day Adventist church, known for its passionate approach to the mission.

In April/May 1990, the largest evangelistic campaign was held on the island with Evangelist Roosevelt Daniels in which 1,025 persons were baptized. This crusade was not only significant for the number of souls that were baptized, but it also sparked many national debates, discussions, and conflicts. These resulted from the massive crowd attendance which caused huge traffic congestion and overspill of the crowd into neighbouring properties. This caused the government of the day to intervene and mandated closure of the meetings one week earlier than was scheduled.¹¹ A new church was established from this campaign and became known as the Maranatha Church. Since then there has been a number of large campaigns which have resulted in increased membership and additional congregations. In 2013, Evangelist Claudius Morgan held a campaign which resulted in the establishment of a new congregation which was subsequently officially organized as the Amazing Grace church on May 7, 2016.

In 2002, the Seventh-day Adventist church in St. Vincent and the Grenadines celebrated a milestone. In his celebratory overview of developments in the Caribbean Union Conference, Pastor Jansen Trotman made the

following comments: "This year has been one of rejoicing for us in the Caribbean Union; it not only marks the 75th anniversary of our beloved Caribbean Union College, but it also marks the 100th anniversary of the work in the island of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Graduates of Caribbean Union College are now found on every continent in the world and in so many of the islands of the sea. Many have even contributed to the growth of the work in St. Vincent and the Grenadines over the years..."¹²

St. Vincent and the Grenadines has produced a number of persons who have worked at various levels of the church. In 1980, Pastor Theodore Sargeant became the first indigenous departmental director at the East Caribbean Conference when he was elected as publishing director. Other directors from St. Vincent and the Grenadines who later served at the conference level included, Pastor Leo Fleary and Dr. Hilary Bowman as education directors, Pastor Andrew Farrel as family life and ministerial director, Pastor Dermoth Baptiste as lay activities and ADRA director, Pastor Raulford Baptiste as family life and stewardship director and Sis Alene Thomas as women and children ministries director.¹³

Elder Hilary Bowman and Pastor Andrew Farrel were subsequently called to the Caribbean Union Conference to serve as education director and ministerial and family life directors respectively. Dr. Bowman also holds the distinction of being the first indigenous person to be appointed president of the University of the Southern Caribbean, effective October 03, 2016.¹⁴ In August 2001, Pastor Dermoth Baptiste became the first indigenous administrator when he was elected to serve the East Caribbean Conference as executive secretary, a position which he held until December 31, 2007.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines remained with the East Caribbean Conference until August 31, 2007, when it became a Region of the Caribbean Union Conference. Under this arrangement the union had administrative oversight of its operations, mission, and finances. Pastor Dermoth Baptiste was appointed as the first coordinator of the region and a coordinating council was elected to administer its operations. On March 9, 2008 a "Mission's Operation Centre" was officially commissioned on the basement of the Dental Clinic.¹⁵

In July 2011, Pastor Dermoth Baptiste was elected to serve the Caribbean Union as vice president and stewardship director. In this same year, on June 22, he received the Order of the British Empire, for his services to Christian fellowship and community work. Pastor Henry Snagg was then called from the University of the Southern Caribbean to serve as coordinator of the region.¹⁶

In 2012, evaluations were conducted by the Caribbean Union to determine whether the SVG region was ready for a change in administrative status. At the end of these exercises a recommendation was passed on to the Inter American Division that SVG was capable of providing for its own leadership, administration, institutions, and finances. In May of that year, the division undertook its own evaluation and took a decision which was passed on to the Caribbean Union Conference that "Mission Status" be granted to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In June 2012, at the union's mid-year committee meeting, administrators of the mission were elected as follows: President, Pastor Dermoth Baptiste; Executive Secretary, Pastor Henry Snagg; Treasurer,

Adele Clarke.¹⁷

On November 17-19, 2012, the inaugural session of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Mission was convened at the Richland Park SDA Church, under the theme, "Embracing the Promise: Fulfilling the Mission." Reports were presented to the constituency on the operations of the church since becoming a region, and directors were elected to serve the mission for the ensuing four years. The following directors were elected or appointed: Pastor Dermoth Baptiste, education and stewardships; Pastor Henry Snagg, family life; Pastor Ian Williams, personal ministries; Pastor Terence Haynes, health; Pastor Karlson Samuel, publishing; Sister Alene Thomas, women and children ministries; Pastor Exton Clarke, youth, ministerial and religious liberty; Bro Rohand Charles, auditor and Pastor Claudius Morgan, communication and Adventist development and relief agency.

In April 2014, Pastor Exton Clarke accepted a call to serve in his native country as executive secretary of the Guyana Conference. This necessitated adjustment to the mission's administrative and Directors line up. The following adjustments were made in June 2014: Rohand Charles was appointed treasurer; health was assigned to Alene Thomas; youth, ministerial and religious liberty were assigned to Pastor Terence Haynes.

On March 1, 2015 Pastor Claudius Morgan was called to serve the Caribbean Union as assistant to the president with responsibility for training, evangelism and conservation. Around the same time period, Sister Therese Haynes was appointed auditor of the mission.¹⁸

In October 2014, as a result of a new publishing policy which was implemented in the Inter American Division, all Adventist Book Centers are now owned and operated by the Inter American Division Publishing Association (IADPA) bookstores. This became necessary so as to make the bookstores more business oriented, cost effective and customer friendly. As a result, on December 20, 2014 IADPA began managing the local ABC. Maria Burnette, the local manager and Mrs Corel Thorpe, sales clerk were made redundant. They were replaced by regional director of IADPA, Esther Isidore and local sales clerk, Wendy Alexander. Burnette was reassigned to the Mountain View Adventist Academy as secretary, while Corel Thorpe, sales clerk was reassigned to the mission office as office attendant.

The first quadrennial session was held November 23-26, 2016, under the theme, "Transformed by Grace, United in Mission, Jesus is Coming" at which time the constituency received reports of the mission's accomplishment for the four years under review, January 1, 2012 to December 31, 2015. A new executive committee was also elected to provide leadership and manage the affairs of the mission for the ensuing term. It is instructive to note that during the four years under review 2,293 new converts were baptized, two new congregations planted, nine church buildings dedicated or rededicated, two parcels of land purchased, five pastors ordained to full gospel ministry, fourteen teachers commissioned to the teaching ministry, three congregations organized to full-fledged churches, three ground breaking ceremonies conducted for church building construction and construction in progress for a second Youth Development Center.

In July 2017, a bold and enterprising decision was taken to negotiate a loan for the purchase of a property adjacent to the dental clinic. This property was refurbished and retrofitted to be the official headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is comprised of 14 offices, a board room, reception hall and a conference centre with a seating capacity of 450. It was officially dedicated and opened on April 21, 2019.

The worker force of the SVG Mission currently has 86 employees, comprising of three administrators, four full-time directors, an auditor, five office staff, 15 pastors, four principals, 50 teachers, and four dental clinic workers.

Presidents

Dermonth Baptiste (2012-present)

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NOTES

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2. Dermoth Baptiste, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol.76, No.1, First Quarter, 2003, 4.
3. Eric John Murray, *A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Trinidad and Tobago 1891-1981* (Trinidad: The College Press, 1982), 139.
4. Baptiste, 5.
5. Ibid.
6. Theodore Jaria, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 84. No. 1.
7. Eric John Murray, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 48. No. 2, 2nd Quarter, 1975, 13.
8. Glenn O. Phillips, *Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados: Over A Century of Adventism, 1884-1991* (Bridgetown, Barbados: Caribbean Graphics & Letchworth Ltd, 1991), 87.
9. Saint Vincent and The Grenadines Act, No.11 of 2009, 1 Assent. Dr. Frederick Ballantyne, Govenor General 29th September 2009, 49.
10. Baptiste, 5.
11. A. B. Noel, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 63. No. 2, 2nd Quarter, 1990, 11.
12. "A Time to Celebrate," *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, First Quarter 2003, 2.
13. Theodore Jaria, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 84, No. 3, 3rd Quarter 2011, 6.
14. Kern Tobias & Claudius Morgan, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 90. No. 2. 2nd Quarter 2017, 32.
15. Eugene Daniel, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 80. No.3, 3rd Quarter 2007, 11.
16. Vincey Newsletter, Issue 8, June 2011, quoted in *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 85, No.1, First Quarter, 2012, 18.
17. Kern Tobias and Theodore Jaria, *Caribbean Union Gleanings*, Vol. 86, No. 1, 4th Quarter 2012 & 1st Quarter 2013, 14.
18. Caribbean Union Conference President's Report 2011-2016, 16th Quinquennial Session, Caribbean Union Conference archives.

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