

Curacao Conference

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Formerly under the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission, Curacao Conference covers the island state of Curacao. Currently it is part of the Dutch Caribbean Union Mission in the Inter-American Division of the Seventh-day Adventists. Curacao Conference was organized in 1934, reorganized and territory divided in 2007, renamed in 2011, and reorganized in 2014 and 2015 and again in 2017.

Statistics (June 30, 2018): Churches, 26; membership, 8,226; population, 158,000.¹

Origin and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Work

By the end of the eighteenth century there were, mainly three religious groups in Curaçao: the Protestants, the Catholics and the Sephardic Jews.² Also, until the end of the eighteenth century there was no permanent religious mission work. It was in 1824 that the Roman Catholic Church, under the leadership of a priest from Amsterdam, by the name of Martinus Nieuwindt, established an official and permanent mission work on Curaçao. His salary was paid by the colonial government because, from the outset, Christianization seemed to have served the interest of the slave trade enterprise called West India Company. The deputy director of the company explicitly ordered the Roman Catholic priests in 1708 to impress upon the slaves obedience and loyalty to their masters.³ It is this practice that has been carried on by the colonial government through to the autonomous island state that was established in October 2010. Thus, in Curaçao, there is still no separation between church and state as the government, at this time, still pays the salary of the clerics of the three religious groups aforementioned.

The European settlers wanted an education based on the Dutch experience for their children and preferred to be separate from the slaves in their beliefs. For that reason, very few blacks and indigenous people were allowed to adopt the Reformed Protestant faith. On the other hand, the visionary Catholic priest, Martinus Nieuwindt, working primarily among the slaves, planted schools all over the island thus developing a strong Catholic regime between 1824 and 1860 and brought the majority of the island population on the Roman Catholic side of the religious landscape of the island. The Catholic influence grew so strong that sometimes there were tensions between the church and the government.⁴ Statistical reports dated 2011 indicated that the

Roman Catholic church comprises 72.8 percent of the island population. That was a significant decline from 80.1 percent in 2001. Today, the influence of the popular church is strongly felt in the religious, political, legal, social, architectural, and cultural life of the island society. One can only imagine how challenging it would have been for the early Adventist pioneers to start the Adventist work in Curaçao during the nineteen twenties.

On July 7, 1924, Elder William E. Baxter, president of the Caribbean Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Elder Charles E. Knight, secretary and treasurer of the same union, together with Elder Fred Steeves, Missionary Secretary, and Pedro Sanoja a colporteur, arrived in Curaçao on board the SS van Rensselaer.⁵ Baxter and Knight continued to Balboa, Canal Zone, while Steeves and Sanoja remained in Curaçao to sell books. Fred Steeves indicates that there had been previous efforts to sell the title *Heralds of the Morning* in Curaçao, therefore they “were not optimistic over our prospects.”⁶ Nonetheless, they launched out in faith and delivered about a case and a half of the books. That was almost one hundred percent of the materials they took with them.⁷

The first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to Curaçao was C. E. Knight, who arrived in 1926 and organized a small company on October 16 of that year.⁸ Elder Knight indicated that he had to endure fierce opposition from the established church. The priests warned the people against the work of other Christian denominations.⁹ In Bonaire they succeeded in closing the Dutch Reformed Church. In spite of the priests’ seeming determined effort to stop all protestant work, the people were very friendly.¹⁰ When elder Knight moved to Curaçao, the General Delivery office of the Caribbean Union Conference was transferred to Willemstad, Curaçao. Elder Knight remained the Secretary-Treasurer of the union with residence in Curaçao.¹¹ Perhaps one of the most important actions for the development of the work in the Netherlands Antilles in general, and in Curaçao in particular, was the registration of the Curaçao Book and Bible House with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry on January 1, 1926. Thus, the first institution was established in the Netherlands Antilles.

Charles Knight and his wife held meetings in a building in Hoogstraat, Otrabanda, Curaçao. This building was called “Kranshi Bieuw.” In the mind of the locals, “Kranshi” is the office of the state registrar, because that building, for a period of time, served as the office of the public registrar. Nonetheless, the nickname “Kranshi” stems from “ladies wreath” in Dutch, which is a name of a ladies club established by the daughter of a Protestant minister who held meetings in that building. Thus, from the word “krans” which is “wreath” in Dutch, the building has become known as “Kranshi.”¹² Apparently, that same building was occupied for a short period in 1930 by the Dutch Reformed church. On October 26, 1926, the first fruits from these meetings were harvested when elder Knight baptized a group of eleven individuals.¹³ The second baptism took place on April 9, 1927, and on this same date the Mundu Nobo church was organized as the first official Seventh-day Adventist Church in Curaçao.¹⁴

Ill health forced the Knight family to leave the following year, and D. C. Babcock, who succeeded him, directed the work from 1927 to 1930. During those years the first piece of land for a church building was secured in

Mundo Nobo. Until 1935 these islands were included in the Venezuela Mission, but in that year the Netherlands Antilles Mission (until 1934 known as Curaçao Mission) was organized and incorporated under the name of “Adventzendingsgenootschap.” In 1951 a church was erected and dedicated in Chere-Asile.

In 1962 the office was moved from rented quarters to a denominationally owned property.

In 1967 a visionary Dutch preacher by the name of Jan Brinkman became president of the mission with headquarters in Curaçao,¹⁵ and in 1985 the mission became a conference.¹⁶

Education

In 1969 the government provided a school building to the church. and an eight-teacher school was opened in August on Curaçao with an attendance of about 300 pupils. Elder Brinkman went to the Netherlands and Suriname and brought qualified teachers to start the school and its first principal, Carl Betram, came from the Netherlands. In 1974, a kindergarten school was opened with 50 pupils and two teachers. In a letter dated August 13, 2004, the government of the Netherlands Antilles authorized the establishment of the second denominational school in Kaya Lando, Koraalspecht, Curaçao.¹⁷ In 2008 a whirlwind destroyed part of the school established by Brinkman and temporary shelter was found in Bonam which is about 12km further north east of the island. The government facilitated a piece of land in Mahuma South to the School Foundation in 2011, for the building and relocating of the school. At the end of the next year, with the help of Maranatha International, twelve class rooms were built in Mahuma South which is about six kilometers south west of the original school location.¹⁸ Only part of the student population in Bonam could have moved to Mahuma South, as several of the students come from the east which is closer to the school in Bonam. Consequently, in January 2013, the church began operating three schools on the budget of two. Providentially, on April 23, 2018 the government of Curaçao recognized the third school in Bonam as an official school of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁹ Since then, the church has three official and fully subsidized schools on the island country of Curaçao. The current student population is Mahuma South 287, Koraalspecht 151, Bonam 277 giving a total of 715.

Health Ministry

On March 29, 1970 the Antillean Adventist Hospital opened its doors to the public of Curaçao.²⁰ The operation of the hospital has given the church a prominent place on the island. People who have never heard about the church would have heard about the Adventist Hospital. In 2009, the church in Curaçao signed an MOU with Adventist Health International in a strategic effort to strengthen the operation of the hospital. In November 2010, the hospital was flooded and suffered catastrophic loss of equipment, furniture, medical supplies and medicines.²¹ Nonetheless, the church institution resiliently picked up and became strong enough to purchase the premises of the former Taams Kliniek in May 2015.²²

Organizational History

The Netherlands Antilles Mission was organized from the Venezuela Mission in 1935.²³ The Curaçao and Bonaire Conference is a renaming of the formerly called Netherlands Antilles Conference.²⁴ There are three reasons for the name change. Firstly, the territory covered by this administrative unit did not represent all the countries of the Netherlands Antilles. Secondly, since 1986, Aruba was separated politically from the Netherlands Antilles and so in 2007, Aruba was organized into the Aruba Mission. Thirdly, in October 2010, the country “Netherlands Antilles” was dissolved. Each of the two islands which remained in the current administrative unit represented two different countries, namely Curaçao and the Netherlands; Bonaire being a special municipality of the Netherlands. Due to political, social, and financial difficulties in Venezuela, the Aruba Mission and the Curacao and Bonaire Conference, were separated from Venezuela and became attached fields of the Inter-American Division as of January 2014.²⁵ On October 29, 2014 during the Inter-American Division year-end meetings in Willemstad, Curaçao, it was voted “to authorize the operation of the Bonaire Region, with headquarters in Bonaire, in the Curacao and Bonaire Conference from January 1, 2015.”²⁶ When the operating policies of the Dutch Caribbean Union were drafted and adopted by the Executive Committee of the Inter-American Division, the Curaçao and Bonaire Conference and Aruba Mission were organized within the Dutch Caribbean Union.²⁷ During its quadrennial session on May 20, 2017 the delegates voted to request a name change of the conference from Curaçao and Bonaire Conference to Curaçao Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.²⁸

Some Recent Major Activities and Accomplishments

Vacation Bible Schools are held every year, with 500 to 750 children in attendance. There is a rapidly growing radio Bible school, which offers lessons in Dutch, English, Papiamentu, and Spanish-the four principal languages spoken. Radio and television programs are also broadcast in these four languages. The work is advancing rapidly among the Papiamentu speaking people. Each church has an active Dorcas Welfare Society. Literature sales amount to \$35,000 each year.

A multipurpose auditorium with a seating capacity of more than 1500 people was inaugurated on August 10^h 2012.²⁹ With the assistance of Maranatha International the primary school in Curaçao, formerly located in Noord Roosendaal and with temporary sojourn in Bonam was relocated to Mahuma Zuid.³⁰ In December 2012, the church in Curaçao and Bonaire distributed 50,000 copies of the book entitled *The Great Hope*, “E Gran Speransa” in Papiamentu. This book is a special edition made of excerpts from the Great Controversy by E.G. White.³¹ In that same year, 2012, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists - Inter-American Division took an action to recommend to the General Conference to reorganize the Venezuela Antilles Union and to operate Aruba Mission and Curaçao and Bonaire Conference as attached fields of the Inter-American Division.³² In May 2015, Advent Hospital on the island of Curaçao purchased the building of the former Taams hospital to operate

an Adventist Hospital in another location. This action expanded the operation of the Advent Hospital and established the presence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a significant way on the island of Curaçao. In November 2015, the Church distributed a record number 97,325 copies of the book entitled *Health and Hope*, “Salú i Speransa” in Papiamentu. The average baptism per year from 2013 to 2017 has been 269 souls. Church membership in mid-June 2018 was 9,562.

List of Presidents

Curaçao Mission: Lunney Astleford (1934–1937); C. J. Foster (1937); Ellis P. Howard (1937–1940); Leon Henry Gardiner (1940–1948); Roy Henneberg (1948–1951); Reinhold Klingbeil (1951–1953).

Netherlands Antilles Mission: Reinhold Klingbeil (1953); Glenn F. Hendriksen (1953–1954 acting); Robert E. Gibson (1954–1959); Carl D. Christensen (1959–1964); Isidore Hodge (1964–1966); George Carambot (1966); Jan Brinkman (1967–1978); Elías López Muñoz (1978–1981); Hugh Blackman (1981–1984); Theodorus M. Grep (1984–1985).

Netherlands Antilles Conference: Theodorus M. Grep (1985–1988); Mirto P. Presentacion (1988–1989); Orlando Manuela (1989–1991); Daniel Duffis (1991–1994).

Netherlands Antilles and Aruba Conference (territory divided 2007): Daniel Duffis (1994–1997); Orlando Manuela (1997–2001); Daniel Duffis (2001–2009).

Curaçao and Bonaire Conference (renamed in 2011): Shurman Kook (2009–2015); Arnulfo Angila (2015–2017).

Curaçao Conference: Sherwin Willems (May 2017).

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NOTES

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 14.
5. Daniel A. Duffis, *Legacy of Faith: The History of the Seventh-day Adventists on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao* (Nirgua, Venezuela: Litografia INSTIVOC, 2013), 19.
6. Ibid., 21.
7. Ibid.

8. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), 1776.
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10. Ibid., 25.
11. Ibid.
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14. Ibid.
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