

# North Bahamas Conference

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## ANDREW EUGENE BURROWS

Andrew Eugene Burrows, MM, J.P., is the executive secretary of the North Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He has a Masters of Ministry degree from Northern Caribbean University. Burrows has served as youth, communication, personal ministries, and stewardship director at both the conference and the union level. He currently pastors the Shiloh and Blessed Hope Seventh-day Adventists Churches and also serves as a volunteer chaplain at the Rand Memorial Hospital in Freeport, Grand Bahama, Bahamas. Burrows loves to preach and teach the Word of God. He and his wife, Karen, an elementary school teacher, have three children.

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The North Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is one of the four conferences that make up the Atlantic Caribbean Union of Seventh-day Adventists. The Atlantic Caribbean Union is, in turn, a part of the Inter-American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

The territory of the North Bahamas Conference consists of the islands of Abaco, The Berry Islands, Bimini, and Grand Bahama and their related cays. These four island groupings are situated in the northern most section of the country known as the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. The city of Freeport, the nation's second city, is located on the island of Grand Bahama. The North Bahamas Conference is headquartered in the city of Freeport, Grand Bahama. The South Bahamas Conference, the other conference territory in the Bahamas, has its headquarters on the island of New Providence. Nassau is the capital of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and is situated on the island of New Providence.

## The Bahamas

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, a former British colony, became independent on July 10, 1973. This archipelago of islands extends 760 miles from the coast of Florida in the north-west to Haiti in the south-east. The group consists of 700 islands and 2,400 cays with an area of 5,358 sq. miles (13,878 sq. km.). Thirty of the islands are inhabited.<sup>1</sup> One of the islands in the Bahamas, San Salvador, was the first landfall of Christopher Columbus in the New World on October 12, 1492. The current (2019) population of the Bahamas is about 402,000 with 85 percent of African descent, 12 percent European, and 3 percent Asian and Latin Americans.<sup>2</sup> English is the official language of the country.

## The Advent Message in The Bahamas

The seed of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Bahamas can be traced back to November 27, 1893, when C.H. Richards, a colporteur, and his wife came from the United States of America to Nassau, The Bahamas to distribute religious books. They were the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries to the islands of the Bahamas.

<sup>3</sup> In 1895, they were replaced by another literature evangelist named Charles F. Parmele. It was then that the first Bahamian family of William Charles Antonio, his wife, Mary C. Griffith- Antonio, and their four children, Evangeline Antonio-Wood, Reginald, Helen, and William W. Antonio were impacted by the reading of the Bible along with such books as *Bible Readings for The Home* and *The Desire of Ages* that Parmele had sold to them. As a result, this family became the first Seventh-day Adventist members in The Bahamas. For fourteen years, they held Sabbath School at their home in Hospital Lane on the island of New Providence.<sup>4</sup>

Around 1909, Pastor W.A. Swaney, an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister, arrived in Nassau, New Providence, The Bahamas. In 1911, after conducting the first Adventist evangelist crusade in The Bahamas at the Odd Fellows Lodge Hall on Meeting Street, twenty-one persons were baptized, and the nucleus of the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in The Bahamas was formed.<sup>5</sup> From these humble beginnings, the Advent message was carried to other islands in The Bahamas, some of which included Andros, Eleuthera, San Salvador, Abaco, and Grand Bahama.

## Abaco

The Advent message in the Northern Bahamas was started and grew through the efforts of various colporteurs or literature evangelists. In 1910, the Advent Message was carried to the island of Abaco in the northern Bahamas by a colporteur named Samuel H. Combs.<sup>6</sup> In June 1961, Pastor L. V. McMillan, a native of The Bahamas, along with his new wife, Wealthia, was assigned by the Bahamas Mission as the resident pastor to the island of Abaco. In August 1961, Pastor H. E. Nembhard, then president of the East Jamaica Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, joined Pastor L.V. McMillan to conduct a series of meetings on the island of Abaco.<sup>7</sup>

They were assisted by Nicholas Binnie, another colporteur, and the meetings were held under a tent in the Dundas Town settlement on the property of the Holmes sisters who had Adventist connections. However, after a few nights, the attendance waned, and meetings were moved to the Murphy Town settlement. In Murphy Town, they were provided hospitality by the Swain family who also provided a piece of property to pitch the tent for the meetings. At the end of the meetings, no one from Dundas Town or Murphy Town was baptized.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, four persons were baptized from Spring City, a settlement made up of people who worked for the paper company, cutting pine trees which were exported to make paper. A large percentage of the population descended from the Turks and Caicos Islands and already knew of the Adventist message. Some of the early baptized members living in Spring City, Abaco were Nurse Lucy, Era Green, and Walter Been.<sup>9</sup>

It was also during the pastorate of the McMillans that the first church on that island was built in Murphy Town by the Bahamas Mission.<sup>10</sup> However, when the building was completed, the McMillans held meetings on Sunday and Wednesday nights only. There were no meetings held on Sabbaths as there were no Seventh-day Adventists in the Murphy Town settlement. On Sabbaths, Pastor McMillan and his family would travel to Spring City or Snake Cay to have service with the newly baptized members, their friends, and neighbors.<sup>11</sup>

In 1970, Brother M. V. Smith, another colporteur, and his wife, Bernice, went to Abaco to assist in the spreading of the gospel. He operated from his home based in Spring City and would conduct Sabbath worship services at his home. Eventually, the Lord provided a house in Spring City which would be used for meeting purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Brother Smith also worked throughout the length and breadth of Abaco from Crown Haven in the north to Sandy Point in the south. He spent some weekends at the home of the Thompsons in Fox Town in North Abaco. Soon, the entire Thompson family became members of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

It was not until 1976 that the first Abaconians from Murphy Town were baptized through the evangelistic efforts of Pastor Hugh. A. Roach. These persons included Sis. Eloise Cornish and her mother, Eva, among others. Two years later, in 1978, Hilly Bootle, Edith McKenzie, Mavis Reckley, and Ruthiemae Theagene were baptized. Then in 1980, two women who would become veteran leaders in the church, Sister Verleta Davis and Sister Violet Bootle, embraced the Advent Message.<sup>13</sup>

In 1979, Pastors Keith D. Albury and Paul A. Scavella conducted a crusade in which nine souls were baptized. In 1980, Pastor Paul Scavella was assigned as the district pastor for the island of Abaco, giving the Smiths a little respite from their labors. However, before their departure, Bro M.V. Smith showed the new pastor the site in the Marsh Harbor area which was acquired from the government for the construction of a church.<sup>14</sup>

Under Pastor Paul Scavella's leadership, the church members were mobilized and the church building project was begun. Through the able assistance of Jacob Saunders, Edward Reckley, Harim Davis, Theophilus Davis, Frank Hepburn, Emmitt Bottle, and others, the foundation was poured.<sup>15</sup> Further, it was during the pastoral leadership of Pastor Leonard Johnson that the members constructed a wooden structure on the property where the Marsh Harbour Church was built. The structure would be used for the preschool and later for worship services for the Salem Church.

The message spread with even greater intensity during 1998 when Pastor Kent Price along with laypersons such as Elders Isaac Collie, Roger Sands, and Richard Berry organized Branch Sabbath Schools in Crossing Rock in South Abaco and Cooper's Town in North Abaco.<sup>16</sup>

Today, the island of Abaco has five organized churches: Marsh Harbor Church (organized in 1961), the Salem Church (organized in 1997), the South Abaco Church (organized in 2003), the North Abaco Church (organized in 2005), and the Ebenezer Church (organized in 2017).

## Grand Bahama

The foundational work of the Seventh - day Adventist Church on the island of Grand Bahama was laid by the legendary colporteur, Brother Leonard R. Rahming who started a Branch Sabbath School in West End around 1940. Further, around the late 1960s, the evangelistic team headed by Pastors H. E Nembhard and L. V. McMillan conducted a crusade in West End, Grand Bahama that resulted in more than twenty persons being

baptized. Some of those originally baptized were Bernice Sands, Hilda Kemp, Eliza Rolle, and Ruthie Mae Roll-Precentie. Thus, West End became the cradle of the Adventist work in Grand Bahama.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to 1967, there was no Seventh-day Adventist presence in the Freeport area. However, as the Eight Mile Rock and Freeport churches were organized, it became important to secure property in the Freeport area. Thus, with the help of Rt. Hon. Lynden O. Pindling, then the Opposition leader of The Bahamas, the church was able to secure a license to operate in the Port Authority area. Then on June 22, 1967, Pastor Silas N. McKinney, the president of the Bahamas Mission, met with Mr. Wallace Groves, chairman of the Grand Bahama Port Authority, and was granted a lease agreement for 99 years for 37, 617 sq. ft. of land for the Freeport Church. The property was secured on March 18, 1968, and the church was erected thereafter in 1969. Then in 1985, during the administration of Pastor Hugh A. Roach, a further 3.978 acres of land were leased, giving a grand total of some 4.84 acres on the corner of Gambier Drive and East Beach Way Drive.<sup>18</sup> This site would eventually house the present headquarters of the North Bahamas Conference and also the Evangeline Jarvis Community Service and Distribution Center.

Evangelism was the key to growth of the work in Grand Bahama. In 1981, Pastor S. N. McKinney broke the century barrier for baptisms outside of New Providence when approximately one hundred and twenty precious souls were baptized during a campaign held in the Freeport area. Further, during the pastorate of Pastor Michael A. Smith in the late 1980s, Evangelist Don Crowder conducted a crusade in Freeport and one hundred persons were baptized. Additionally, it was during an evangelistic campaign conducted by the Eight Mile Rock and Freeport Seventh-day Adventist Churches with Pastor Michael D. Toote as the evangelist, that the Shiloh and Bethesda Churches were organized in 1993.<sup>19</sup>

Three years later, in 1996, the Sunrise Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized with one hundred and twenty-five members. This was the result of an evangelistic crusade conducted by Evangelist Randy Stafford. Additionally, in 2004, Pastor Guy Nembhard, then evangelist for the West Indies Union Conference, headed a mission-wide campaign in the Eight Mile Rock area that reaped a harvest of some one hundred and thirty-eight precious souls. Mention should also be made of Pastor Ricardo V. Bain and the Eight Mile Rock and West End congregations who baptized, as a single district, ninety-seven souls in 2005.<sup>20</sup> Truly, it was through evangelism that the church grew on the island of Grand Bahama.

## Bimini and the Berry Islands

The Bimini and the Berry Islands are the other two island groupings in the conference's territory. On October 1, 2008, a team from the conference headquarters travelled to Great Harbour Cay in the Berry Islands where a Branch Sabbath School was established with a nucleus of some fifteen persons.<sup>21</sup> Further, on November 1, 2009, a group of women led by Arleen Sands, the Women's Ministries director of the North Bahamas Conference, traveled to the island of Bimini, where a Branch School was also established with some nine individuals.<sup>22</sup>

On December 1, 2019, the executive committee of the conference voted to grant company status to the group of Seventh-day Adventist members in the Berry Islands. It was given the name Great Harbour Cay Seventh-day Adventist Company. Dawnette Campbell was voted by the committee to lead the company of believers.<sup>23</sup>

## Education in the North Bahamas Conference

The raising up of churches was an important aspect for the growth of the Adventist faith in the Bahamas. So also was the establishment of schools. Bahamas Academy in Nassau, New Providence, traces its beginning to the earliest days of Adventism's Bahamian founding, around 1912, just one year after the first Adventist evangelistic crusade in The Bahamas. Later, during the presidency of Pastor Hugh A. Roach a second educational institution in The Bahamas was started on the island of Grand Bahama. In August 1981, Grand Bahama Academy (GBA) of Seventh-day Adventists was established with Ruth McKinney as its first principal.<sup>24</sup> The school initially held classes at the YMCA Building in Freeport before moving to the rear and later the wing of the Freeport Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>25</sup>

On Sunday, November 29, 1998, a dedication ceremony was conducted for Grand Bahama Academy at its present site on Torcross Road and Sandcombe Drive in Freeport, Grand Bahama, The Bahamas. Pastor Keith Albury, president of the Bahamas Conference, Pastor Paul A. Scavella, the Northern Region coordinator, and Elder Hayden Hanna, the principal, took part in the dedication. The Rt. Hon. Hubert A. Ingraham, prime minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, delivered the keynote address.<sup>26</sup> Today, Grand Bahama Academy with classes from K2- Grade 12 continues to provide a Christ-centered education in the territory of the North Bahamas Conference.

## Reorganizing for Mission

In 1992, during the quincentennial year celebrations of Christopher Columbus' landing in The Bahamas, the leadership of the Inter-American Division took initial steps in the realignment of the territory of The Bahamas. On July 27-28 of that year, George Brown, president of the Inter-American Division, led a survey team on a visit to The Bahamas to determine if the Bahamas Conference was ready to divide its field.<sup>27</sup>

Recognizing the tremendous growth of Seventh-day Adventist work in The Bahamas in general and its consistent development and growth in the Northern Bahamas, an old dream of many decades of territorial readjustment was finally realized on January 10, 2003, at the First Quadrennial Session of the Bahamas Conference. The executive committee of the West Indies Union of Seventh-day Adventists, chaired by Dr. Patrick L. Allen, was convened; and it was voted to recommend the reorganization of the Bahamas Conference into two fields: the Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists with headquarters in Nassau, New Providence, and the North Bahamas Mission of Seventh-day Adventists with headquarters on the island of Grand Bahama. During this assembly, the leaders of the new mission were appointed. They were Pastor Keith D. Albury, president; Pastor E.

Bryan Tinker, executive secretary; and Elder Roderick Sands, treasurer.<sup>28</sup>

Following this historic action by the West Indies Union committee, a survey team headed by Elder Israel Leito, president of the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, met in New Providence at the Bahamas Conference headquarters on March 25, 2003, and ratified the earlier action taken by the union.

Friday, June 27, 2003, the Inaugural Session of the North Bahamas Mission was held under the theme “United in Wonder of His Grace.” Delegates from the islands of Grand Bahama and Abaco together with leaders from the Inter-American Division, the West Indies Union, and the Bahamas Conference met at the Freeport Seventh-day Adventist Church to participate in this historic event.<sup>29</sup>

Territorial adjustment allotted to the North Bahamas Mission the territory incorporating the islands of Abaco, Grand Bahama, Bimini, and the Berry Islands and their related cays. At that time, the membership in these territories was one thousand three hundred and four persons, worshiping in nine churches and one company.<sup>30</sup>

Through the visionary and dedicated leadership of the first North Bahamas Mission president, Dr. Keith D. Albury, and his team, work in the mission produced tremendous growth. The initial three years of financial subsidies from the Bahamas Conference strengthened the foundational work of the mission. Pastor Albury coordinated the formative and critical stages of the mission as well as the ground-breaking ceremony for the mission's new headquarters complex which was held on Sunday, March 21, 2004. He also provided guidance for the initial stages of its building. Sadly, in January 2006, the untimely passing of this luminary leader occurred. This necessitated the election of a new president, Pastor E. Bryan Tinker, and a new executive secretary, Pastor Michael A Smith, by the West Indies Union executive committee on June 7, 2006, at the Freeport Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>31</sup>

As the work continued to grow and expand in the North Bahamas, plans were made for a change in status from a mission to a conference. Then, on March 27, 2008, at a meeting of the executive committee of the West Indies Union Conference, it was voted to pass on to the Inter-American Division a request for the mission to be evaluated for conference status.<sup>32</sup> This request received a favorable response, and during the Inter-American Division's year-end meetings held from November 2-7, 2008, it was voted that the North Bahamas Mission be upgraded to conference status. The date of Sunday, February 1, 2009, was voted for the inauguration of the North Bahamas Conference.<sup>33</sup>

## Faithfulness Amidst the Storms

One of the challenges to the stability of the work in The Bahamas—particularly the North Bahamas—is the threat of hurricanes. Some of the storms that significantly impacted the work of the church, especially on the islands of Grand Bahama and Abaco, include the great Abaco Hurricane of 1932, Hurricanes Floyd (2000), Jeanne (2004), Frances (2004), Wilma (2005), Matthew (2016), and Dorian (2019).

Sunday, September 1, 2019, Hurricane Dorian, with sustained winds peaking at 185 mph, struck the island of Abaco as a Category 5 hurricane and went on to strike the island of Grand Bahama with similar intensity. According to Phil Klotzbach, Colorado State University meteorologist, Hurricane Dorian tracked only about 25 miles in 24 hours. Dorian was the strongest hurricane on record to strike The Bahamas since records began in 1851. It was also the first Category 5 hurricane to make landfall on Grand Bahama Island, and at 185 mph, it was the strongest hurricane on record to hit Abaco Island.<sup>34</sup>

According to Gentry Morris, a local leader of the Marsh Harbour Church in Abaco, in the immediate aftermath of the storm, some 90% of the membership of the two churches in the Central Abaco district, namely the Marsh Harbour and Salem Churches, evacuated to Nassau, New Providence, The Bahamas, other islands in The Bahamas, and countries such as the United States of America and Canada.<sup>35</sup> The Marsh Harbor Church, the main church on the island of Abaco, was significantly damaged. The Salem Church, both its building in current use and a new building still under construction, was destroyed.<sup>36</sup> On the island of Grand Bahama, Hurricane Dorian also affected several of the worship facilities. The Bethesda Church was destroyed, while the Shiloh Church was flooded out. The Freeport Church sustained damaged to its fellowship hall. The impact of the storm not only impacted the members' ability to come together for worship, but members and residents had to deal with the destruction of and damage to their homes.

Notwithstanding, through the crisis, the wider church organization, including the Atlantic Caribbean Union and the Inter-American Division, stood with and supported the North Bahamas Conference during an astonishingly challenging time. The administration of both the division and the union visited the two islands impacted by the storm. Elder Filiberto Verduzco, treasurer for the church in the Inter-American Division, noted that "this trip allowed us to let the church in The Bahamas know that we are with them and this is the time to help our brothers and sisters in need, while quantifying ways in which we can help as a church." He further remarked that "our members are displaced, have lost everything, are not able to work and they are not able to give to the church.... But we have a great opportunity to help rebuild churches, help members so they can return to their island and can find normal life again."<sup>37</sup>

Yet, the greatest tragedy of the passing of Hurricane Dorian was the loss of life and the uncertainty and despair felt by many who survived. On September 6, 2019, two days after the passage of Hurricane Dorian, the prime minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, the Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis, in announcing the human casualties of the storm expressed: "the loss of life we are experiencing is catastrophic and devastating. The grief we will bear as a country begins with the families who have lost loved ones." He called the devastation "unprecedented and extensive."<sup>38</sup>

One year after Hurricane Dorian and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Seventh-day Adventist leaders in the Bahamas took time to pray for the nation and give thanks for God's mercy and His protection during the current hurricane season and the pandemic crisis at a special online program on September 4, 2020. "We are

here to thank God for how far He has brought us, for we recognize but for the Lord where would we be?" said Pastor Eric D. Clarke, president of the North Bahamas Conference, at the start of the program. "We went through a special and particular way through Hurricane Dorian, but we want to reflect on how God has been so gracious to us."<sup>39</sup>

The legacy of the North Bahamas Conference is one of resiliency amidst challenges, faithfulness to God amidst uncertainty, and trust in God in all circumstances. Pastor Elie Henry, president of the Inter-American Division, echoed similar sentiments after visiting the territory on September 18, 2019. "The trip was not just about surveying the damage caused by the hurricane," said Pastor Henry. "For me it was much more impressive to meet the church members and see the way they have great maturity in their faith."<sup>40</sup>

## List of Presidents

Presidents: Keith D. Albury (2003-2006); E. Bryan Tinker (2006-2015); Henry R. Moncur III (2016-2017); Eric D. Clarke (2017 -)

## Membership

According to the Adventist Yearbook, as of October 2020, the membership of the North Bahamas Conference stood at 4069 scattered across 12 churches and 1 company.<sup>41</sup>

## Significant Events

1910: The Advent message was taken to the island of Abaco.

1940: The Advent message was introduced to the island of Grand Bahama.

1981: Grand Bahama Academy was established with Ruth McKinney as the first principal.

January 10, 2003: The North Bahamas Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was established during the First Quadrennial Session of the Bahamas Conference held at the Hillview Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nassau, New Providence, The Bahamas. Pastor Keith D. Albury was elected as the first president.

June 27, 2003: The North Bahamas Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was officially inaugurated when its first mission session was held.

January 13, 2008: The official opening and dedication of the headquarters for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Northern Bahamas was held at the site on East Beachway Drive, Freeport, Grand Bahama, The Bahamas.

February 1, 2009: The North Bahamas Mission was officially inaugurated as the North Bahamas Conference with Pastor E. Bryan Tinker as the first conference president.

December 3, 2011: Waylon Johnson of the North Bahamas Conference, representing the Atlantic Caribbean Union, won the Inter-American Division's Bible Boom finals which were held in Puerto Rico. Waylon Johnson became the first youth from an English-speaking union in the Division to win the Bible Boom finals.

June 14, 2014: The North Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists received its Certificate of Incorporation from the Registrar General's Department of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

May 12, 2015: Waylon Johnson of the North Bahamas Conference, representing the Atlantic Caribbean Union, won the Inter-American Division's 2010 - 2015 Super Bible Boom finals which were held at the Inter-American Division's Headquarters in Miami, Florida, U.S.A.

January 14, 2017: Pastors Fritz Gerald François and Patrick Tyrill became the first ministers to be ordained in the North Bahamas Conference during a ceremony held at the Shiloh Seventh-day Adventist Church in Freeport, Grand Bahama.

June 1, 2019: First baptism on the island of Great Harbour Cay in the Berry Islands was conducted. Gilbert Bain was baptized during a weekend visit to the group of believers by Pastor Andrew E. Burrows, executive secretary of North Bahamas Conference.

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