



West Bay Church

Photo courtesy of Atlantic Caribbean Union archives.

# Cayman Islands

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## SHIRLINE S. HENRIQUES

Shirline S. Henriques, B.S.N. (West Indies College), M.A. (Central Michigan University), has served the Adventist Church in numerous capacities in the past, including ADRA director for the Cayman Islands Conference (CIC) and the Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission director of Women's Ministries for CIC, grief counselor, and member of the North Caribbean University (NCU) Board of Governors. Henriques was also CEO of Cayman Islands Health Services Authority, and the registrar of Health Practice Commission and 5 Councils. Some of the awards that she has received are Certificate and Badge of Honor – Work in AIDS in Cayman Islands, Presidents Medallion from NCU, and Nursing Pioneer Award from the Cayman Islands government.

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Cayman Islands is governed by the Cayman Islands Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. As of June 30, 2018, there were 6,108 baptized Seventh-day Adventist members in the total population of 62,000, and 16 organized churches.<sup>1</sup>

## Historical Overview

The Cayman Islands, located in the [Caribbean](#), are a [British overseas territory](#) that have been under various governments since their discovery by Europeans. [Christopher Columbus](#) sighted the Cayman Islands on May 10, 1503, and named them Las Tortugas after the numerous [sea turtles](#) seen swimming in the surrounding waters. Columbus had found the two small islands ([Cayman Brac](#) and [Little Cayman](#)), and it was these two islands that he named "Las Tortugas."

The 1523 "Turin map" of the islands was the first to refer to them as Los Lagartos, meaning alligators or large lizards.<sup>2</sup> By 1530, they were known as the Caymanes after the [Carib](#) word caimán for the marine crocodile.

[England](#) took formal control of the Cayman Islands, along with Jamaica, under the Treaty of Madrid in 1670.<sup>3</sup> The first settlers came from Jamaica in 1661-71 to Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. Spanish pirates raided these first settlers so regularly, that they abandoned the settlement. It was not until 1730, that permanent settlements started to take place on any of the three islands. The islands were consistently used as hideouts for English pirates within the Caribbean because of their location - even after the end of legitimate privateering in 1713.

The Cayman Islands were officially declared and administered as a dependency of Jamaica from 1863. The Cayman Islands dependency status to Jamaica ceased officially in 1959 with the formation of the Federation of the West Indies. However, the Governor of Jamaica remained the Governor of the Cayman Islands and had reserve powers over the islands. Starting in 1959, the chief official overseeing the day-to-day affairs of the islands (for the Governor) was the administrator. When Jamaica became independent in 1962, the Cayman Islands broke its administrative links with Jamaica and opted to become a direct dependency of the [British Crown](#).

In 1972, a new constitution was adopted. That constitution was revised when the Cayman Islands established internal self-government in 1993 and again in 2009.

## The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Cayman Islands

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Cayman Islands began as the result of a visit by Captain Gilbert McLaughlin to Bonacca, Spanish Honduras. There, Captain McLaughlin heard the teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist message. He returned to the district of East End in the Cayman Islands (where he grew up) determined to verify or dispute the truth of the Seventh-day Sabbath after discussion with his pastor. The conversation did not go as he expected. His pastor informed him that it was his faith, and not the day that he kept, that would save him. The day was not important, but there was denial of the information that he brought to his pastor.<sup>4</sup> After Captain McLaughlin's return from his second trip to Bonacca in 1894, he threw his full energy into initiating a faith-based group in the district of East End. This undertaking met with strong resistance, for the primary religion at the time was the Presbyterian faith, of which his wife was a part. "We'll be the laughing stock of the whole district of East End, of the whole island. I want none of your foolish religion. I must also ask you not to

work outside the house on Sundays” was his wife’s response when Mr. McLaughlin shared his new-found faith. With no intention of being disrespectful to his wife’s request, Captain McLaughlin did not accept Sunday as the Bible day of rest. Every Sunday, he left the house and walked through the district in full view of everyone with his axe on his shoulder to trim lumber, making it clear that Gilbert McLaughlin was not keeping Sunday<sup>5</sup> Captain McLaughlin purchased beachfront land and built a small thatch roof facility for worship. In 1895, two literature evangelists, F. I. Richardson and B. B. Newman, visited the Cayman Islands. They worked for two years holding evangelistic meetings which sowed seeds that would later be reaped. Meanwhile, a determined Captain McLaughlin sent a request to Jamaica for assistance in evangelism. In 1905, Pastor Frank Hall came to the island. His work resulted in 20 baptisms, including the baptism of Captain McLaughlin’s wife. Pastor Hall was responsible for the formation of Sabbath Schools in Georgetown and East End. He worked until 1909 when he returned to Jamaica.<sup>6</sup>

## Education

The Church continued to grow in Grand Cayman. Captain McLaughlin’s oldest son, Allen McLaughlin, was sent to Jamaica to West Indies Training School (now Northern Caribbean University) to study to become a teacher. He returned to Grand Cayman in 1922, and his father paid him to start a school under a thatch shed behind the little church building in East End. This was the very first Adventist church school in the island. Mr. Allen (as he was best known) taught there until the government offered him a better paying job in September 1923. The school continued until 1968 and the last teacher/principal was Mrs. Omlin Campbell (née Alberga) of Jamaica. When the school closed, many of the students transitioned to the mission school in the building at the back of the old mission house on Fort Street. Sis Gleeda Forbes of George Town owned and operated a private school, which was purchased by the Seventh-day Adventist Mission. This became the mission school, and Sis Forbes was taken on as a teacher. The school was named for Brother George Merren and Sis. Clara Eden, who each made a significant financial investment in the purchase of the school. Thus, the Edmer (*Ed - Eden, Mer - Merren*) Adventist School was born. Donalee Tatum (née Solomon) was the first principal for the new school in George Town.<sup>7</sup> Teachers of the East End Adventist Church School included Pastor James Innis and his wife Shirley Innis, Pearline Jervis-Wesley, Pastor Dudley Mahabee, Omlin Alberga-Campbell, Pastor Don and Constance March, and Donalee Tatum.<sup>8</sup>

The livelihood of Caymanian people was strongly tied to the sea. Bonacca was a port of travel where fishing was good, and many Caymanians lived there. Travel between the islands was commonplace. Thus, Captain Gilbert McLaughlin and Mr. Torebo Lazzari (known as uncle Teebie) of Cayman Brac heard the Adventist message on one of their trips to Bonacca in the early 1890s. However, it took the ministry of Pastor H. P. Lawson in a 1929 open air meeting, to lead uncle Teebie and 16 other people in Cayman Brac to baptism. The place for a church became the primary concern for the newly baptized. Pastor Lawson left the Brac shortly after the baptisms and

encouraged them to construct a temporary structure until the funds for a permanent building were available. Mr. and Mrs. Nicholson (new converts) donated land for the church building and a permanent structure 30 by 22 feet was built.<sup>9</sup>

## The Cayman Islands Mission

The Seventh-day Adventist church was organized into a mission in the Cayman Islands in 1929, with 33 members including those from Cayman Brac.<sup>10</sup> In 1930, Pastor I. G. Knight and his wife of the United States came to take up leadership of the church in the Cayman Islands. By 1932, the construction of three churches was near completion: East End, George Town, and the Creek Church on Cayman Brac. In 1931, at the end of Pastor Knight's tenure, following the death of his wife, the mission had a combined membership of 60 persons, as well as six Sabbath Schools throughout the islands.<sup>11</sup> In 1931, Pastor Frank Fletcher of Jamaica led the work in Cayman Brac for a short time. He left before the 1932 hurricane hit the islands. Pastor Fletcher married Ermyn Lazzari of the Brac which gave him a special link to the people of Cayman Brac.<sup>12</sup>

A major hurricane, known only as the 1932 hurricane, hit the islands on November 8, 1932. Pastor Knight was completing the finishing touches on the new church at the Creek. He was staying at Mr. Torebo Lazzari's home while working. Mr. Lazzari took him, the church members, and all their animals to the Bluff where he had sheltered during another storm in 1915.<sup>13</sup> The Bluff is a limestone outcrop, rising steadily along the length of the island up to 43 meters (141 ft.) above sea level at the eastern end. On the Bluff are a number of caves of varying sizes, and the little band of temporary refugees, along with a few others, populated them.

"The 1932 hurricane killed 109 people from a population of 150, from the small Cayman Brac community, including many men and women, young and old, whose bodies were found on the rocks after the flood waters subsided. Three ships out turtling with our boys on board never returned, and a fourth ship, a freighter bound for Panama with some of our Brac people on it, was lost at sea. Not only was the death toll enormous considering the small size of Cayman Brac's population, but the destruction of property was equally significant."<sup>14</sup>

None of the Adventist members with Bro. Lazzari lost their lives. Just ten days following this disaster, Pastor Knight had completed the repairs to the little church and started work on a two-bedroom mission house at the back of the church. The mission house was to be used by any mission worker who visited.<sup>15</sup> This church and mission house had to be rebuilt again after another hurricane struck in 1935. Repairs were completed by Pastor A. E. Crawford who was assigned to the Cayman Islands Mission following Pastor Knight's departure. He and the little company of believers worked hard and steadily until completion. Mr. T. Lazzari remained a stalwart man of God and guided the Cayman Brac church for years as the elder in the presence or absence of a pastor.

Mr. Lee Goulbourne of Jamaica came to the Cayman Islands as a missionary on October 19, 1939. He found a group of believers worshipping in Genevera Bodden's home in Bodden Town. The group was not connected to

any other group, and who had shared the truth with them has never been documented. Mr. Goulbourne decided to have an evangelistic outreach. After much negotiation, he was allowed to use the old government school house that later became the medical clinic. The schoolhouse did not have adequate seating, so the town hall was offered by the administrator, Mr. Jones. Mr. Goulbourne was skilled, and with two old typewriters given to him by the administrator, he taught young women shorthand and typing. His missionary outreach was successful, and in 1940, he requested the assistance of the West Indies Union Mission in evangelism. Pastor George Smith responded and by that time, 34 souls were ready for baptism.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Charles Raymond Wood of Bodden Town, a Caymanian and a graduate of Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, returned home and joined Pastor Smith in his work of spreading the gospel. The little group that had been meeting in the home of Sis. Genevera Bodden in Bodden Town shifted from home to home as they outgrew their environment. A plot of land, on which the church still stands, was purchased in 1949 by Pastor Hurst and Bro Raymond Wood, in the name of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The church building was started in early 1950, and was completed in 1952.<sup>17</sup> Bro Wood, or Uncle Ray as he was fondly called, was a familiar sight on his bicycle each morning and evening cycling to, or from Bodden Town to George Town. He was the first local colporteur in the mission and was also responsible for the mission's Bible correspondence school. "He was a role model for all in the community and was respected as an authority on religious and family issues."<sup>18</sup>

George A. Merren, a member of the prominent Merren entrepreneurial family, grew up in the "Merren's Church." He had been encouraged, witnessed to, and studied with by Pastor I. G. Knight. Bro. George A. Merren was baptized in 1943, by Pastor R. H. Pierson. His daughter, Mary Merren Thompson, and his wife, Rose Merren, were also baptized by Pastor Pierson in 1946. Bro. Merren, or Mr. Georgie as he was fondly called, became an elder in the George Town church which had been established in early 1932. He served as church leader and sometimes pastor in the absence of representatives from the higher organization. Bro. Merren would ride his bicycle to Savannah, Bodden Town, and East End to hold Branch Sabbath School!<sup>19</sup> His dedication to the work of God was unwavering. His daughter, Mrs. Mary Thompson, tells of a night when

amid high winds and lashing rain (due to a hurricane passing by), he conducted prayer meeting. He sang hymns, prayed, and preached the sermon he had prepared. Then, he announced the closing hymn, sang it, and pronounced the benediction. How many people were in the audience? Not one single soul. "I had an appointment with God at the church, He was there and I had to go to meet Him." ...The following week a stranger came to him, "I passed by the church that night you were holding the meeting alone. You couldn't see me, but I took shelter from the storm by the front door. ...I decided then and there that I would give my life to the same Jesus you were talking about."<sup>20</sup>

In East End, Bro. Theophilus Bodden was a professional mariner and builder. He accepted the Adventist message in 1908, and became a stalwart for God. Bro. Bodden spearheaded the repair of the East End church



following damage by the 1914 hurricane. He served as first elder for the East End church for many years and labored to bring others to a knowledge of the truth.<sup>21</sup>

In the early 1940's a branch Sabbath School was started in Ms. Erna Hislop's home conducted by Mr. Champy Forbes. This grew to a company, and a little church to accommodate the group was built with much help from the George Town believers. Elder Tom Dias of George Town would ride his bicycle to conduct services in Savannah, assisted many times by Dr. & Mrs. McTaggart. Ms. Hislop had initially donated the property for the little church, and later gave the adjoining property on which the church still stands, as well as three church owned apartments used to house conference workers.<sup>22</sup>

During 1950-51, Pastor Orville Schneider of the United States was president of the Cayman Islands Mission. He worked under strong prejudice and opposition by some of the other local churches. He reported very little progress anywhere but George Town, but in a 1992 interview with Pastor Jeff K. Thompson,<sup>23</sup> Pastor Schneider cited his only success as that of his evangelistic outreach in East End. He attributed the success to Bro. Theophilus Bodden's witness in the district.

Pastor Balfour Hurst became president in 1951. He began with an emphasis in West Bay where there were two companies of believers worshipping in separate homes: one at the home of Mrs. Verona Jackson, and the other at Mrs. Inez Ebanks. Pastor Norman Nosworthy served the mission as district pastor in 1951-1953. At the close of his tenure, he was instrumental in getting the West Bay church started in 1953. Pastor Nosworthy donated the money he received from the sale of land in Jamaica towards the church's construction. A new building, dedicated in November 2018, stands on the same site.

1994 marked 100 years of Adventist presence in the Cayman Islands. The Cayman Islands Mission was granted conference status on June 12, 2004. The church had experienced a steady growth from 33 members in 1929 to 1,376 in 1994 and 2,593 members in 2004.<sup>24</sup>

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