

# Belize

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Belize is the only English-speaking nation in Central America, a member of the commonwealth of the British Empire, and a part of the Caribbean community. It has a small population of approximately 400,000 people and an area of 8,867 square miles. Belize has many traditions and customs from many diverse cultures and is described as “The Melting Pot of Cultures.”

Its government is a parliamentary democracy. Belize is bordered on the north by Mexico and on the west and south by Guatemala. Its inhabitants are comprised of a mixture of European, African, Mayan, Carib, Syrian, East Indian, and Chinese races. Belize boasts a history filled with leadership, entrepreneurship, intrigue, courage, uniqueness, and diversity.

## Historical Overview of Belize

Belize’s first inhabitants came from a strong Mayan civilization, which fell in 900-1000 AD. Remnants of that civilization can be found spread throughout the country in different locations. One of the first European Spanish settlers was Gonzalo Guerrero. Guerrero was captured by the Mayans in 1511 after a shipwreck incident. He married the daughter of Nachankan, the chief of Chetumal, and later settled in Chactemal (now Corozal Town in the north of Belize). One hundred years later, a substantial growth of settlers, mainly pirates and disbanded soldiers from the settlement in Jamaica, came to Belize as logwood cutters. Logwood was a natural resource Great Britain sought for its dyes. The 1763 Treaty of Paris and the 1783 Treaty of Versailles gave the British settlers permission to import African slaves to work as logwood cutters and export the product. Inter-marriage between European settlers, Mayan Indians, and African slaves resulted in *mestizo* and creole offspring that inhabit Belize today. Other races like Garifuna Caribs, East Indian indentured workers, Chinese and Taiwanese, and German Mennonite immigrants entered Belize at later dates, adding to its rich culture of many races making up the Belizean people.

An important event in Belize’s development as a British colony was the Battle of St. George’s Caye in 1798 in which the Baymen settlers and their slaves defended the colony from an attempt from Spain to take control of the British settlement. After a series of battles, the defeated Spaniards retreated from the British Honduras coast. These events allowed the settlement to become an official British colony 70 years later. In the early 1830s, the settlement was established and named “Balis” after Captain Peter Wallace, who settled at the mouth of the

Belize River. Some sources claim that the name "Belize" derived from the Mayan term, "Balix," which means "muddy waters." In any case, in 1862, the settlement was named "British Honduras" and formally became a crown colony of the British Empire in 1871. In 1973, the British Honduras was renamed "Belize" and, on September 21, 1981, gained its independence.

Belmopan was established as the capital city after Belize was devastated by Hurricane Hattie in 1961. The city is located in the heart of the nation at 200 feet above sea level. Belmopan was established with the purpose of relocating government offices facilities and services to a safe location in the event of any subsequent natural disaster. Resultant from Hurricane Hattie, Belize City was devastated, and Hattieville was established to relocate residents.

In the late 1880s, under the direction of the British governor and the legislative council, the settlement began to develop its own governing constitution known as "Barnaby's Code." As a result, universal adult suffrage was obtained, giving local residents the right to elect their representatives through a democratic voting process. By the mid-1950s, the first democratic election was held. This paved the way to self-government and bicameral legislature and, finally, to independence on September 21, 1981.

## Development of the Adventist Church in Belize

In 1885, Elizabeth Gauterau introduced the Adventist message to British Honduras. In the 1800s-early 1900s, the Honduras Bay Island and British Honduras fields were part of Central American Mission with headquarters in British Honduras. By 1905, this mission field had about 160 members, five organized churches, and five groups. Over time, things in the presidency, secretary, treasury, membership, churches, and groups have changed; one thing that has not was the mission: to preach the gospel throughout the world.

T. H. Gibbs visited the country and, with help from an interested person, kept a reading rack with Adventist literature on the main street of the city. In late 1891, L. C. Chadwick arrived in the country and found a few converts. In 1892, F. J. Hutchins and his wife, who dedicated themselves to distributing literature, arrived and started a series of evangelistic efforts until 1894. From 1893-1900, J. C. Brooks and J. A. Morrow contributed to the growth of the believers through public and literature evangelism.

In 1906, Central American Mission was made a part of West Indian Union Conference, and Guatemala and El Salvador were annexed. Soon, it was reorganized into Central American Conference with 333 members. In 1913, the conference became missions, and the General Conference renamed them the North Latin American Missions. In 1918, North Honduras Mission was organized with 267 members. In 1930, this mission was divided, allowing the creation of British Honduras Mission with British Honduras and the Bay Islands as its territory. In 1937, British Honduras Mission was reorganized with 385 members and eight churches. By 1944, the membership had increased to 422 members with 12 churches. In 1944, the mission was transferred to be a part

of British West Indies Union Mission. By 1952, British Honduras Mission had 15 churches and 486 members and was transferred to Central American Union Mission.

## Church Growth

The church continued to grow in Belize. In 1900, Pastor C. Goodrich evangelized in Punta Gorda, Distrito Toledo, which produced three baptized members. Around 1922, Pastor Carey arrived in the country and began colporteur work in the communities. His work resulted in the baptism of 14 people and the construction of a church and a mission house. After Pastor Carey's work, Pastor C. Overstreet's work resulted in the group's growth to 48 members. Unfortunately, he had to return to the United States due to contracting malaria. A few years later, in the Yarborough area, the first church school in British Honduras was established through funds donated by Pastor Leopold Garbutt and family. The school was named "James Garbutt" in memory of Pastor Garbutt's grandson.

In 1930, Irvin Sabido was employed as a colporteur evangelist in Punta Gorda. Through his work, ten members were baptized, bringing the group to a total of 58 members. In 1930, Sabido would spread the Adventist message throughout the island of San Pedro to fishermen. They, in turn, would bring the message to Pembroke Hall (now Libertad Village), where they sold their catches. Other laymen who tirelessly worked in Pembroke Hall were Rodwell Gibson, who worked as a colporteur evangelist, Felipe Clarke, Amy Campbell, and Christiline Gill, who prepared 32 candidates for baptism. As a result, a church was constructed for the new believers. Some families from this group would later relocate to the village of Calcutta and establish a Seventh-day Adventist presence there.

While the work in Corozal District started, Pastor Overstreet also began work in Stann Creek District. His work was followed by Pastor Leopold Garbutt. The brethren met at Garbutt's family home for worship. Soon, the Panting, Parking, and Hernandez families from Jamaica joined this group and increased the number of believers.

In 1934, Christiline Gill began to evangelize in Corozal Town, where she established a Sabbath School at a nearby farm belonging to Alfred Anderson. C. B. Sutton arrived soon after and rented a two-story house in the center of town. Ms. Gill's Sabbath School transferred to this location, where she began a church school as well.

By 1937, the church's membership increased to 385. In 1937, brethren from the May Pen area supported by Elder C. B. Sutton began to evangelize in the nearby Crooked Tree Village. They held evangelistic meetings during weekends, resulting in baptisms and the formation of a new group. They acquired a plot of land and built a church. Sometime later, they lost their church and then held services in the homes of members like Cecil Wade and Rose Jones. In 1995, a volunteer group from Mt. Vernon Academy, USA, arrived and built a church. In January 2003, Pastor Dennis Slusher organized the group as "Crooked Tree Seventh-day Adventist Church."

In the late 1930s, an evangelist named Astleford arrived in the village of Monkey River in the Toledo District and held a series of evangelistic meetings, resulting in the formation of a group that worshipped at a building donated by Carmen Wells. In 1945, a hurricane damaged the building, which the brethren immediately repaired. The Monkey River believers could only be accessed via water transportation. Pastors such as Archbold, Woodbourne, and Clayton met this challenge to reach and serve those believers.

In 1944, the organization in British Honduras had 486 members and 12 established churches. In 1955, Pastor R. T. Rankin and Pastor Wilbur Oliver held a series of evangelistic meetings in Santa Clara Village in the Corozal District, resulting in another group of believers comprised of the Canul, Castañeda, Can, and Yah families. Lay members such as Andrew Rancharan, Sr., Perfecto Lopez, Alfredo Alcala, Andrew Gillharry, Edna Williams, Theodore Whittaker and his wife, Rupert Cassanova, Reynaldo Mendez, Higinio Magaña, Francisco Quetzal, Henry Gilharry, Julio Olivarez, and Artemio Clarke made notable contributions to the establishment of church congregations and groups throughout Corozal District.

In the late 1950s, Pastor R. T. Rankin, then a mission president, with Albert Coleman and his family held evangelistic meetings at "Favorita Hall," resulting in the baptism of five people.

In 1961, Layman Alfonso Morales was baptized in Sand Hill Village. With his zeal for evangelism, other families soon joined. These included the Alvarado, Tun, Ozaeta, McCulloch, and Wagner families. Land was acquired, a church building was completed, and the church was organized.

In 1962, Pastor Ellis Coe and Pastor F. Skoretz held a series of meetings for three months in the new community of Hattieville along the western highway, resulting in the formation of a group with 50 members. After some unfortunate situations, land for a church building was purchased, and the church was organized in 1971. A notable event for the church's organization was when the former police constable, Cecil Hamilton, resigned from the police force to serve God and the church.

Pastor Ellis Coe went to Douglas Village, Orange Walk District, and conducted a series of evangelistic meetings. From this, the Carillo and Correa families formed a church group. Also, in Belize City, Evangelist John Williams held a six-week series of meetings, and 20 people accepted the message of salvation. Further, in Dangriga Town, 12 people converted to the Adventist faith, which established a group in the town. In 1967, the first Seventh-day Adventists in Byscane Village included the Rodas, Flowers, Cox, and Dawson families. George Cox evangelized in the Washing Tree area, which was later revisited by the laymen, Jerome Bevans and Norman Westby, through evangelistic campaigns. This led to the formation of a new church group.

In 1968, Pastor Aquilino Jesse, Violet James, and the Raisin family worked in the Red Creek Village of Cayo District, which formed a group of believers. Pastor Albert Reid continued to work and saw the group grow to become the first organized church in Santa Elena.

In the late 1960s, Marcial Magana, Artemio Clarke, and Irvin Sabido from the Calcutta Seventh-day Adventist church sensed the need for a secondary education institution in Corozal District with which to educate their children in a Christian setting. They were instrumental in presenting this need to the ministry of education. With the due process, Pastor Winston Cunningham approached the education minister, Gwendolyn Lizarraga, who assured the church that everything would be done to fulfill the project. With government approval and help from the higher Seventh-day Adventist organization, Pastor Cunningham and the local brethren prepared land, constructed buildings, and acquired furniture and machinery to begin operations. In September 1969, the "Belize Adventist Vocational College" was inaugurated.

The Belize Adventist Vocational College had a principal, staff, and 53 students, who had mostly come from the southern part of the country and the Bay Islands of Honduras. The faith of the brethren was tested and rewarded. The institution grew; in the 1980s, it was renamed "Belize Adventist College."

In 1971, Pastor Coe held evangelistic meetings for two months in Orange Walk Town, which resulted in the town's first church group with the Roberts, Guerra, and Distan families. From this, the need for a primary school for the children in the area was felt and pursued by District Pastor Dennis Slusher. Under his leadership, Solomon's School became the first Seventh-day Adventist primary school in Orange Walk District with his wife, Anna Slusher, as the first principal.

The Adventist presence in Guinea Grass Village began with the Cima, Can, and Gomez families and was supported by the Calcutta brethren under the guidance of Artemio Clarke. A six-week evangelistic campaign conducted by Pastor Wilbert Oliver led to the growth of the group in spite of the villagers' efforts to resist the brethren's work in the village. Consistent efforts paid off, and interests in the village increased.

In 1972, Petronilo Romero and his wife moved to work in Punta Gorda. Through their efforts, five people were baptized. Due to a promise to take care of the Zil family farm, they returned to Orange Walk. Later, Pastor Coe was sent to work in Punta Gorda. After a series of meetings, he baptized 12 new members. A church was organized during the leadership of Pastor Hugh Blackmen and Marlon Moody. Under the leadership of the district pastors, Appleton Carr and William Borland, a church was built in Punta Gorda.

In 1975, L. V. McMillan held evangelistic meetings. In 1977, Pastor Rainey, Pastor George Brown, and Carlos Mcfarlane held more evangelistic meetings. These efforts helped establish a second church in Belize City at Wilson Street with the first church on Yarborough Road.

In 1977, the union evangelist, B. L. Roberts, held an eight-week-long series of meetings in Dangriga Town, resulting in the baptism of 17 people. Pastor Ellis Coe continued evangelistic meetings that baptized eight more. Around the same time, the church school in Dangriga, which had closed down in 1964, was reopened. Pastor Coe was instrumental in its reopening with 33 students and the teacher, Eleanor Coe. Pastor Coe also held a two-month-long series of meetings in Independence Village, resulting in new believers joining Milton Burgess's group.

Walter Garbutt, Sr., and Carl Garbutt's family were added to the group in Monkey River Village. A Spanish group would begin later with Santos's work leading to the organization of a church with 30 members. Other laymen that contributed to the work in Stann Creek District included Thomas Walker in Sittee Village and Sister Cabral in Placencia Village.

The work in Belmopan, Belize, began with the laymen, Jerome Bevans and Norman Westby. In 1980, Evangelist Dobias, Pastor Usher, and Pastor Milliner held a one-month series of meetings, 42 people were converted, and a group was established. Pastor Samuel Clarke and Pastor Woodbine later consolidated the group. Bevans and Westby later carried the gospel to Roaring Creek Village while Ricardo Correa began work in Salvapan.

Pastor Orlando Magaña was instrumental in the foundation of another church and primary school in Cayo District in 1981. Pastor Ellis Coe was transferred to Cayo District and was responsible for finishing its construction. After negotiations with the chief education minister, Inez Sanchez, and the district education officer, Hilberto Chulim, and through cooperation with the committed brethren of the Santa Elena Church, the construction was completed. With the parents' support, the school was inaugurated as Eden Primary School in September 1982. A few years later, Pastor Coe responded to the brethren's concern to work on establishing a high school. After negotiations with the ministry of education officials and the education officer, Hilberto Chulim, and through cooperation with the brethren, the road was paved, and the high school was opened in Belize. With donations from Dr. Ray Mundall and his wife, La Loma Luz Hospital, Bullet Tree and Benque Viejo churches, Pastor William Borland, Eduardo Juan, Frank Armstrong, Nurse Joan Crichton, and the British high commissioner, the high school was inaugurated in September 1987. It was started with Raymond Mortis as principal, Rosalva Garnett as secretary, Licia Bevans and Rosa Rivera as teachers, and 55 students.

In 1986, during a two-month series of meetings, Pastor Coe, Hector Cadle, and Victor August brought the Adventist message to the village of Georgeville. Cadle, August, and Raymond Mortis were heavily involved in growing the group into a church. In 1988, Sister Silvia Lord and the brethren of Mt. Zion Church conducted lay efforts to establish a third church in Belize City. After Pastor Dennis Slusher and a lay group in the area conducted an evangelistic effort, the "Good News" church group was formed. A food program was immediately established by the group in the East Canal area, serving as an entry point to the surrounding communities. Also, Canaan High, a third secondary school, was established and inaugurated in September with Pastor Leslie Gillett as principal and Michael Craig as a teacher. Pastor Slusher continued Pastor Rueben Middleton and Pastor Carlos Edwards's attempts to establish a high school in Belize City. It closed down for some time due to financial constraints but was reopened in 1988. It continues to serve students in the Belize City area.

As the church work grew in Belize, so did its services to Belize's communities. In 1995, Ladyville Seventh-day Adventist Clinic in Ladyville Village opened. Through this institution, medical assistance has been given throughout the country by visiting doctors and nurses. Doctor N. R. Prakasam directed this clinic for several years.

After several years of running primary and secondary education institutions in Belize, there was a need for a tertiary institution. After many negotiations between mission administrators and Belize's education minister, Cordel Hyde, and area representative, Florencio Marin, and through the direction of Pastor Aquilino Jesse, principal of Belize Adventist College, the institution was inaugurated in September 1999 with Doctor Raul Clarke as principal and 52 students.

Adventist work in Belize has also gained a radio ministry. For some decades, an early program, "Your Radio Doctor," aired on the national Radio Belize station through the initiative of Pastor Elden Ford and Wilfred Moncrieffe, mission administrators. The need to air the Adventist message in Belize led Windell Borland, Sr., to work and lobby for a radio station to serve the countries of Belize, Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala. Windell Borland, Jr., owns and manages the station that currently airs programs such as "The Voice of Prophecy," "It is Written," "The Quiet Hour," and 3ABN programs. He also lobbied with television stations to air 3ABN programs on a dedicated channel.

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#### SOURCES

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