



Qatar

Photo courtesy of Tibor Szilvasi.

## Qatar

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### RICK MCEDWARD, AND MELANIE RICHES WIXWAT

Rick McEdward, D.I.S. (Intercultural Studies, Fuller Graduate Schools, Pasadena, California) is a pastor, church planter, and missionary. He spent 11 years pastoring and church planting in the Washington Conference, North American Division. In 2001 he and his wife Marcia moved their family to Colombo, Sri Lanka where they served for four years as missionaries. From 2005-2009 he served as director of Adventist Mission at the Southern Asia-Pacific Division in the Philippines. He later became associate director of the Institute of World Mission prior to his appointment as director of the Global Mission Centers at the General Conference, where he worked for 5 years. In 2016 he and his wife moved to Beirut, Lebanon to take up responsibility as president of the Middle East and North Africa Union. Rick and Marcia have two children.

Melanie Riches Wixwat, B.B.A. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), currently lives in Beirut, Lebanon with her husband Michael, the treasurer for Middle East and North Africa Union (MENAUI). She is administrative assistant to the president and the executive secretary of MENAUI in addition to working as

Qatar is a low-lying desert peninsula extending about 100 miles (161 kilometers) into the Persian Gulf. It currently has an area of 4,473 square miles (11,586 square kilometers) after settling land disputes with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in the 2000s.<sup>1</sup> The population (2020) is 2.4 million. Most Qataris are Arabs, adhering to the Sunni branch of Islam, and Arabic is the official language of the country. An estimated 88% of the population of Qatar is made up of expatriate workers.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1800s Qatar was controlled by the sheikhs of Bahrain. When war broke out in 1867 between the people and their absentee rulers, the British intervened to keep the peace in the Persian Gulf. They installed Muhammad ibn Thani al-Thani, who was head of a leading Qatari family, as the region's first emir. The Ottoman Turks tried to invade Qatar in 1893 but the emir successfully deflected them. In 1916 the emir agreed to allow Qatar to become a British protectorate, and it remained so until 1971 when it declared freedom and became an independent nation.<sup>3</sup>

A nation that was originally known for its pearl diving, Qatar became one of the wealthiest nations in the world after oil was discovered in the 1940s. Currently (2020), 85% of its income comes from major exports such as liquified natural gas exports and petroleum products.<sup>4</sup> Qatar has evolved into a thriving world economy under the leadership of the Al-Thani family. Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who reigned from 1995 to 2013, is credited with developing it into a financial, transportation, and media powerbroker.<sup>5</sup> In 2017 Qatar and other Arab nations entered into a political feud that isolated it from some of the Gulf states. This situation has continued up to the present (2020).

In approximately 1955, the first Seventh-day Adventists came to live in Qatar. The British government needed qualified medical personnel to maintain adequate hospitals in the Gulf area, so they turned to India. Scores of Indian doctors, nurses, and technicians flooded the Persian Gulf countries and among them were several Seventh-day Adventist nurses that landed in Qatar.<sup>6</sup> Up until April of 1963, this little group of nurses had never received a visit by an Adventist minister. Carroll V. Brauer (Departmental Secretary, Middle East Division) writes, "From Dibai [sic] I traveled to Doha, in Qatar. Our eight members there and several friends attended the services on Sabbath. As far as we know, these were the first services ever conducted in Qatar by a Seventh-day Adventist worker."<sup>7</sup>

In 1972, the Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking was used by the Middle East Union as a means of outreach. Kenneth Oster (Evangelist, East Mediterranean Field) and the team of physicians spent many hours over several months, putting the program together, counseling and praying for guidance. Four unentered areas were chosen to initiate the program, and Qatar was one of them. One day before Oster and the group of physicians departed for Qatar, arrangements still had not been made with the top government officials there. However, God had

already opened the doors, and after arriving there, the right people were contacted and all the arrangements were made in just a few short hours. The first Five-Day Plan was held May 6-10, 1972.<sup>8</sup>

Qatar was added to the Gulf Section of the Middle East Union in 1994<sup>9</sup> when the section leader pastor Dennis Pollatos, stationed in Kuwait, made contact with the members living in Doha. A person was baptized at 5 o'clock in the morning in a discrete place at the seaside, and was added to the church's membership. When the union president, Sven H. Jensen, visited in 1996 during an interim period without a section leader, the group requested that the MEU send an evangelist to have meetings and Bible studies with their friends and neighbors. In 1997 pastor Rein Muhlberg, MEU evangelist and ministerial secretary, conducted an evangelistic series with good attendance every evening. In 1998 a new section leader, Desmond Boldeau, took over and made regular visits to the group in Doha.<sup>10</sup>

With growing memberships in the Gulf countries and the increasing need for pastoral care and supervision, the Middle East Union of Seventh-Day Adventists divided the Gulf Section into Gulf Section North and Gulf Section South in the early part of 2000, and Qatar was assigned to be part of the Gulf Section North with groups in Kuwait and Bahrain.<sup>11</sup>

A group of 8 Filipino nurses working at Hamad Hospital in Doha had begun to meet regularly in 1982 and attendance eventually grew to 20. District pastor, Tibor Szilvasi, was assigned to look after the new congregation, and in 2002, he helped organize this group into the first official Adventist company in Qatar.<sup>12</sup>

Previously Qatar had a weekend that included Thursday and Friday. When this was amended to Friday and Saturday, membership increased among expatriate workers and their families. On April 18, 2009, the Doha Church, which now had over 50 members, was officially organized by Tibor Szilvasi, who was now the Secretary of the Middle East Union.<sup>13</sup> Pastor Fausto Farias became the first resident pastor of the Doha Church (2009-2011).<sup>14</sup>

In 2011 the Gulf Field, which includes Qatar and the Doha Church, was organized by the Middle East Union. In 2013 Pastor Muyi Oyinloye succeeded Farias and remained as pastor of Doha until 2019.

Over the years there have been at least four outreach groups maintained by the Doha Church in order to provide more convenient services to Adventists in other parts of Qatar. At least one group of 30 has been meeting in Al Khor ( ) since<sup>5</sup>2013.

Even though foreign missionaries are not permitted in Qatar, there are six recognized denominations. After 2007, church buildings for the official denominations were constructed with permission of the Qatari government. Denominations which are not recognized are expected to operate under one of the recognized churches, often sharing their facilities. The Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Qatar meets in the Anglican church compound and operates under its auspices.<sup>16</sup> Pastor Ted Wilson, General Conference president, visited this congregation in 2017.

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2020 there is one organized Seventh-day Adventist Church in Doha with 346 members.<sup>17</sup> All members of the church in Qatar are expatriate workers and their families.

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## NOTES

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