



The Gulf States Conference office building, captured on June 1, 2020 by Shane Hochstetler.
Photo courtesy of Shane Hochstetler.

Gulf States Conference

SHANE HOCHSTETLER

Shane Hochstetler, B.A. (University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi). Hochstetler has previously served as a Bible worker in Washington, Michigan, and Ohio; a graphic designer in Columbus, Ohio, and, later, as a district pastor in Mississippi for five years. He currently serves as the communication director for the Gulf States Conference and seeks to improve the representation of Christ through positive media and marketing.

The Gulf States Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Southern Union Conference.

Territory: Alabama, Mississippi, and the following counties in Florida: Bay, Calhoun, Escambia, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton, and Washington.¹

Statistics (June 30, 2019): Churches, 81; membership, 13,000; population, 9,119,640.

Origins

Seventh-day Adventist evangelism in Alabama was begun by Jesse Morgan Elliott (sometimes spelled Ellett), a Southern Unionist during the American Civil War who had fought in the Federal army and had been discharged when he lost his eyesight. Having embraced the Adventist faith while in the northern United States, and having returned to his home in Alabama after the war, he went about teaching his new beliefs. His work awakened strong interest and he gathered groups of converts. A request for a Seventh-day Adventist minister to foster the work sent in May 1873 to

E. B. Lane, an evangelist in Edgefield Junction, near Nashville, Tennessee, remained unanswered for several years for lack of an available minister. In 1876, D. M. Canright briefly visited Alabama. By 1878, when A. O. Burrill and his wife came to Bladon (Bladen) Springs, there were already fifty or sixty converts in the state of Alabama, nearly all the fruit of Elliott's work. Burrill organized a church at Bladon Springs and held evangelistic meetings. Early in 1880, C. O. Taylor spent three weeks there. In December 1880, J. O. Corliss, who had been sent to visit the churches in the South, ordained J. M. Elliott to the ministry and licensed J. R. Waite to preach. Interest was further developed in this area through personal work, Bible studies, the colporteur work, and through copies of the *Review*.

As early as 1885, Peter H. Clark established himself in the Gulf City Hotel in Mobile, Alabama, opened a reading room, and carried on personal evangelism by distributing publications. In 1894, the second Seventh-day Adventist church in Alabama was organized in Montgomery. A mission established in February 1887 by S. S. Smith and C. W. Olds was succeeded by a church organized in 1898. Early evangelists used schools, halls, and private homes for meeting places. In 1896, a school was opened in Huntsville for black young people. It later became Oakwood College (now Oakwood University).

Some of those who introduced the Adventist message in Alabama also helped initiate the work in Mississippi as early as the beginning of 1880. One of these, Peter H. Clark, had heard the Adventist message in Texas at least two years earlier and, prompted by urging from C. O. Taylor, was preaching it in Jackson County. Another, J. M. Elliott, preached at Otho, Jasper County, in 1880, where C. O. Taylor baptized seven in 1881. Taylor also preached at Ellisville, in Jones County. In 1885, R. B. Hewitt held a series of meetings at Beauregard, gathering a company of sixteen believers, and organizing a Sabbath school. There was a church in Hatley in 1898, and groups of adherents also met at Amory, Tupelo, and Burnsville.

Around the turn of the century, James Edson White and a group of workers, including W. O. Palmer and Fred Rogers, operated the river steamer *Morning Star* (built in 1894 by White in Allegan, Michigan) on the Mississippi River from its base at Vicksburg, Mississippi. Later on, the *Cumberland*, from its new base at Nashville, Tennessee, was also used as a private mission enterprise and worked for the black people.²

Work among the white people of Vicksburg was begun in November 1902 by F. R. Rogers, who had come to Mississippi to superintend the black schools conducted by James Edson White's Southern Missionary Society. There was much prejudice, but Rogers and his wife showed themselves friendly to their white neighbors, especially to the children, and opened a small school. At first, their son Chester was the only pupil, but interest increased and the school began to grow. A Sunday school was also begun, which drew forty to fifty adults and children. In a short time, Rogers had gained eleven adult converts, with five children. Later, in the countryside outside Vicksburg, he held meetings under the trees that aroused much interest. To aid him in his evangelism, he sold or gave away books and many copies of *Signs of the Times*, *Our Little Friend*, *Life Boat*, and *Good Health*. His work resulted in the organization of several home Sabbath Schools.³

Organizational History

The Alabama Conference, encompassing the entire state, was organized in 1901. By 1908, the territory also included seven counties in western Florida—Calhoun, Escambia, Holmes, Jackson, Santa Rosa, Walton, and Washington. In the 1920s, two more Florida counties were added—Bay and Okaloosa. The first officers of the Alabama Conference were W. L. McNeely, president; A. C. Bird, secretary; C. E. Giles, treasurer; W. L. Bird, education secretary; C. J. Dart, state (literature evangelism) agent. There were four ministers and two licentiates. Conference headquarters resided variously in Selma, Birmingham, Fort Payne, and Clanton. In 1932, the Alabama Conference merged with Mississippi to form the Alabama-Mississippi Conference.

The Mississippi Conference was organized at the camp meeting held at Hatley from July 26 to August 4, 1901, with R. M. Kilgore presiding. In that year, there were three churches, five companies, and 182 members. A constitution was adopted and Rodney S. Owen was elected conference president; W. J. Blake, secretary-treasurer; F. R. Rogers, Sabbath school secretary and superintendent of schools; and H. W. Pierce, state (literature evangelism) agent. Owen and Pierce were the only ordained ministers. A church was organized at Ellisville-Laurel in 1904. At Hattiesburg, a company formed in 1905 with twenty-one members. It was organized as a church in 1914.

The first Adventist church in Jackson, the Mississippi state capital, was organized in 1912 with thirteen charter members. More members were added the same year as the result of evangelistic meetings conducted in the conference office building by C. S. Wiest, the incoming conference president. (Until 1917 the conference president also served as pastor of the Jackson church.) At the end of 1912, the Mississippi Conference had six churches and 159 members.

From 1920 to 1932, the Mississippi and Louisiana conferences were united as the Louisiana-Mississippi Conference, with the headquarters for the new conference remaining at Jackson, Mississippi. The first president of this combined conference was William Randolph Elliott, son of Jesse M. Elliott, the pioneer evangelist of Alabama and Mississippi. (For Louisiana Conference history, see Arkansas-Louisiana Conference.)

In 1932, when the state of Louisiana was transferred to the Southwestern Union Conference, the states of Alabama and Mississippi were united into one conference, retaining the nine counties of northwest Florida that had previously made up a part of the Alabama Conference, and adding Gulf County. R. I. Keate became the first president of the newly organized Alabama-Mississippi Conference. Shortly after the organization, the headquarters were moved from Jackson to Meridian, Mississippi. In 1946, the black constituency of the Alabama-Mississippi Conference separated to

become part of the South Central Conference.

Many of the churches organized in the Alabama-Mississippi Conference during the 1950s and 1960s were the result of evangelistic campaigns conducted by district pastors. From 1955 through 1962, the conference membership increased about 40 percent; twenty-one new churches were organized, and about as many new church buildings constructed. During this same period, a \$2 million school, Bass Memorial Academy (opened in September 1961), was built in southern Mississippi as a result of a gift from I. H. Bass of Lumberton.

Between 1963 and 1975, the Alabama-Mississippi Conference witnessed substantial growth. Twenty-two congregations acquired new church plants. Eight new churches were organized. The million-dollar mark in tithe was first reached in 1972, and in 1973 total conference membership passed 5,000 people. In 1968, the conference acquired a 60-acre (25-hectare) peninsula on Lake Martin, near Dadeville, Alabama, and proceeded to develop Camp Alamisco. Buildings were constructed including a lodge with family rooms, dining hall, and chapel; five camper and staff cabins; a headquarters-gymnasium complex; various storage buildings; and housing accommodations for the camp ranger.

The conference headquarters were moved from Meridian, Mississippi, to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1973 after a careful study indicated the entire territory could best be served from the new location. The building of a new office, prominently located on a suburban five-acre (two-hectare) lot seven miles east of downtown Montgomery, was begun in the fall of 1974. The \$300,000 plant was completed in the spring of 1975.

In 1984 the constituency voted to rename the Alabama-Mississippi Conference the Gulf States Conference so that Florida constituents would also be included in the name.⁴

Hispanic ministry began in the Gulf States Conference in 1994, as described by Dr. Manuel Vasquez:

A Spanish-speaking couple, Jesus and Clara Cisneros, who had arrived in Southern Mississippi in 1991, attended church at times in Meridian or Forest with other Hispanic Sabbath keepers who were part of season tree planting crews. After learning that many Hispanic families lived in the area, the Cisneros began seeking Bible study interests and soon had cultivated a group of about 40 who met for their Sabbath services in the chapel of Pine Forest Academy in Forest. Within three years the group had grown to 80.

The Alonzo Francisco family moved from Florida to Gadsden, Alabama, about 65 miles northeast of Birmingham, and actively sought out other Hispanic families with whom to share their faith. Moving successively from the mother's room in the Gadsden English Church to a classroom and then to a rented meeting place in Albertville, about 30 miles to the northwest, the group grew to about 110 by 1997. Their experience was a repetition of events in other Spanish-speaking congregations, planting another group in Collinsville, approximately 30 miles northeast of Gadsden.⁵

To foster the emerging work among Spanish-speaking people, Eván Valencia was appointed Hispanic Coordinator for the conference in 1995.⁶

Despite numerous natural disasters that devastated portions of the conference in the decades following its re-naming as Gulf States in 1984, membership continued to grow. Evangelism in various forms was disseminated throughout the conference, including full-time evangelists, pastors, bible-workers, small groups, media campaigns, literature, lay evangelism, and more.

In 2014, as a result of this continued growth, a new, larger conference office was constructed just four miles to the east and adjacent to the interstate highway in Montgomery, Alabama. In addition to the increased exposure from the interstate, the new \$1.8M office offered additional features such as new office spaces, warehousing, and a dedicated media studio. Years of saving, combined with the sale of the previous office property, allowed the conference to construct the new office without incurring debt.⁷

Presidents

Alabama Conference: W. L. McNeely, 1901-1905; A. J. Haysmer, 1906-1909; J. R. Bagby, 1910; E. G. Hayes, 1911-1912; A. L. Miller, 1912-1918; J. F. Wright, 1918-1921; S. G. Haughey, 1921-1922; C. B. Stephenson, 1922-1927; A. B. Russell, 1927-1931; N. S. Ashton, 1931-1932.

Mississippi Conference: Rodney S. Owen, 1901-1903; H. G. Thurston, 1904-1905; F. R. Shaeffer, 1906-1907; W. S. Lowry, 1909-1912; C. S. Wiest, 1912-1916; C. J. Buhalts, 1916-1919; W. R. Elliott, 1919-1920.

Louisiana-Mississippi Conference: W. R. Elliott, 1920-1926; F. H. DeVinney, 1926-1932.

Alabama-Mississippi Conference: R. I. Keate, 1932-1937; H.W. Walker, 1937-1941; H. J. Capman, 1941-1949; I. M. Evans, 1949-1954; L. J. Leiske, 1954-1962; Wallace O. Coe, 1962-1965; W. D. Wampler, 1965-1981; W. A. Geary, 1981-1984.

Gulf States Conference: W. A. Geary, 1984-1985; R. R. Hallock, 1985-1992; J. O. Greek, 1992-1996; Melvin K. Eisele, 1996-2015; David O. Livermore 2015-.

Headquarters Address: 10633 Atlanta Highway; Montgomery, Alabama 3611.

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NOTES

1. Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook, "Gulf States Conference," accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=12327?>
2. For the beginnings of the black work in Mississippi see *South Central Conference* and *Southern Missionary Society* in this encyclopedia.?
3. "Origins" section adapted from "Gulf States Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Second Revised Edition (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996).?
4. The "Organizational History" section from the beginning to this point adapted from "Gulf States Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Second Revised Edition (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996).?
5. Manuel Vasquez, *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism, 1899-1999* (Silver Spring, MD: North American Division Multi-Lingual Ministries, 2000), 338.?
6. Vasquez, 339.?
7. Paul Sullivan, "Seventh-day Adventist HQ Moving to New Location," *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 17, 2014, accessed November 9, 2018, <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/east-montgomery/2014/06/17/seventh-day-adventist-hq-moving-new-location/10685975/>; Melvin Eisele, "Gulf States Conference Celebrates God's Blessings," *Southern Tidings*, December 2014, 21; Saundra Kromminga, "Heavenward Bound," *Southern Tidings*, February 2015, 9.?

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