

# Bahamas

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The territory of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas includes South Bahamas Conference (formerly Bahamas Conference) and North Bahamas Conference (formerly North Bahamas Mission), which are part of Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission, a part of the Inter-American Division. South Bahamas Conference's offices are located in Nassau, New Providence, and North Bahamas Conference's offices are located in Freeport, Grand Bahama Island. The Bahamas has 26 ordained ministers, 61 churches, two organized companies, 20,693 members, and a total population of 384,000.

## Overview of Country

As a former British colony, the Bahamas became independent on July 10, 1973, and is presently known as the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. The country is about 50 miles southeast from the Florida Peninsula, consists of 3,865 square miles of land, and extends over 700 miles to the Turks and Caicos Islands. San Salvador, one of its islands, was where Christopher Columbus first landed in the New World. The 2019 population of the Bahamas was about 402,000, 85% of African descent, 12% European, and 3% Asian and Latin American.<sup>1</sup> Although Haitian Creole is spoken among a segment of the population, English is the official language. The people are very religious, and the vast majority profess to be Christians. The Bahamas is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state and a governor general representing the Bahamas. However, executive power is exercised by the cabinet with the prime minister as the head of government. Legislative power is vested in two chambers of parliament, the house of assembly and the senate. The judiciary branch is independent of the legislative and executive branches. A multi-party system is in vogue and is dominated by the progressive Liberal Party and the Free National Movement. Under the constitution, the freedoms of worship, speech, the press, movement, and association are protected. The Bahamas has strong economic ties with North America and is influenced by their culture.

## Origins

The Seventh-day Adventist work was started in the Bahamas by the literature evangelists, C. H. Richards and his wife. They arrived in the Bahamas from New York on November 27, 1893, to introduce Adventism through literature ministry. The estimated population of the country at the time was 40,000-50,000. Richards observed

that "Nassau has a population of about 10,000, one third of whom are whites, and the remainder are colored of all shades from yellow to black."<sup>2</sup>

According to Richards, the Bahamas was a "virgin territory," so he had the opportunity to introduce the Adventist faith to the people. Although he did not report any outstanding conversions, Richards noticed that at least one person understood the Biblical truths and was keeping the Sabbath. Richards reported that a young police officer who was a lay preacher of the Methodist Church had begun to show a keen interest in Adventism. He planned to further his education so that he could teach others. However, his family depended on him for financial support, so he could not leave his job.<sup>3</sup>

During the Richards' service in the Bahamas, they spent most of their time in Nassau. They did visit Andros and Eleuthera. The response they received in Eleuthera was so encouraging that they reported, "If there was some one here to follow up the work, it seems as if almost that whole settlement [Gregory Town] of about fifty families might be brought to the truth."<sup>4</sup>

Before returning to New York in 1894, the Richards requested the board for foreign missions to send two or three families to continue the work in Nassau. They felt that this would enhance the growth of the work. However, the board did not accept their request.

Charles F. Parmele, another literature evangelist, was sent by the board for foreign missions in March 1895 to replace the Richards in the Bahamas. He reported that, soon after he arrived, a family of six whom the Richards had served were keeping the Sabbath and formed the nucleus of the Sabbath School.<sup>5</sup> This was the family of William Charles Antonio and his wife, the first family in the Bahamas to accept Adventist beliefs. William had been the superintendent of a Baptist church. After comparing what he read in the books he bought from C. H. Richards and Charles F. Parmele to what William read in the Bible, he was convinced that the Adventist doctrines were true. As soon as William and his wife were baptized, they started a Sabbath School in their home with their four children. They continued their in-home Sabbath School for about 14 years.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, all the members of the Antonio family became members of the Adventist Church.

Before Parmele returned to America near the end of 1895, he and his wife spent time in Eleuthera. To the delight of the people, Mrs. Parmele opened a private school in the Rock Sound settlement. As a result, Charles Parmele gained the people's interest in the teachings of the church during his open-air meetings.<sup>7</sup>

## Pioneers

Colporteurs from the United States, namely C. H. Richards, Charles F. Parmele, and their wives, were instrumental in introducing the Adventist message to the Bahamas. In addition to these colporteurs, some missionary ministerial families also helped pioneer the work. They included W. A. Sweany, James H. Smith, G. W. Kneeland, M. A. Alterman, W. E. Bidwell, R. J. Sype, and their wives, among other families. Several Bahamian

laypeople worked closely with the foreign missionaries and went from island to island selling books and giving Bible studies. Among these laypeople were Evangeline Antonio-Wood, William W. Antonio, Emmanuel H. and Elizabeth Someillan, Paul Ward, Leonard Rahming, and Oscar Johnson.

## Spread and Development of Adventist Teachings

In 1909, W. A. Sweany became the first ordained Adventist minister to be sent as a missionary to the Bahamas. His arrival marked the end of 14 years of the field not having a full-time worker. To prepare for the evangelistic meetings he planned to conduct, Pastor Sweany distributed tracts and religious books in the community. In spite of opposition, he conducted a series of evangelistic meetings that resulted in the baptism of 21 people in 1911. These members and 35 members of a Sabbath school formed the first Seventh-day Adventist church in the Bahamas.<sup>8</sup> This young church worshipped in Odd Fellows Lodge Hall on Meeting Street in Nassau. The new church became a part of the Southeastern Union Conference in the United States.

Although Pastor Sweany concentrated his efforts on the work in Nassau, he used the literature ministry to pave the path for the work in other islands. In 1910, he sent Colporteur Samuel H. Combs to engage in the literature ministry in Abaco.

Pastor James H. Smith, who succeeded Pastor Sweany, arrived in the Bahamas in 1913 to continue the work. In 1914, the first Adventist church was built on Shirley Street, Nassau, under Pastor Smith's direction. He also organized a day school that operated in the basement of the church.<sup>9</sup> Later, in the 1960s, the Shirley Street Church moved to its present location on Fifth Terrace, Collins Avenue, Nassau.

Beginning in 1915, Pastor Smith accepted the challenge to travel to the other islands and conduct evangelistic meetings on Andros, Eleuthera, Harbour Island, Cat Island, and San Salvador. His efforts resulted in 12 baptisms in Gregory Town, Eleuthera, and 19 in Harbour Island.

The commitment and dedication of several native Bible workers like Elizabeth Someillan contributed to the success of evangelism. Mrs. Someillan was sent to San Salvador as a Bible worker to follow up on the work Pastor Smith had started in August 1918. By the time he returned in June 1919, Mrs. Someillan had 20 people ready for baptism, and the first Adventist Church on San Salvador – the second in the Bahamas – was organized.

<sup>10</sup> About a month later, during a trip to Andros, the Smiths became ill, so the board of foreign missions advised them to return to America for treatment. When they left the Bahamas on permanent return in February 1921, the Adventist Church had 91 total members in the Bahamas, 40 in Nassau and 51 across four of the other islands.<sup>11</sup>

Although missionaries continued arriving from America to lead the mission, the native Bible workers were fully engaged in moving the work forward. In 1922, the General Conference Mission Board categorized the Bahamas Mission as a field of the Antillean Union Mission under the Inter-American Division, and its headquarters were

located in Havana, Cuba. Pastor R. J. Sype became president of the Bahamas Mission in 1928. During his administration, a mission executive committee was set up, a mission house was built on Hawkins Hill, the number of church buildings doubled from six to 12, and the church's membership grew from 164 to 421.<sup>12</sup>

In 1929, a fierce hurricane hit Nassau and destroyed Shirley Street Church. However, the Antillean Union Mission, the Inter-American Division, and the General Conference helped Bahamas Mission rebuild this church, construct Grant's Town Church, the second church in Nassau, and build a school.<sup>13</sup>

In May 1931, Pastor O. P. Reid from Jamaica, the first pastor of Grant's Town Church, conducted a series of evangelistic efforts that resulted in baptizing 14 people.<sup>14</sup> About two months later, he held another series of evangelistic efforts and baptized 25 people. Paul Ward, a native of San Salvador, was also hired as a Bible worker and sent to Cat Island, where he helped organize a new church in Bennett's Harbour. At the time, colporteurs also sold Adventist books throughout the islands, and lay evangelists helped the church grow in the Bahamas.

By 1940, the mission had 17 churches, 545 members, and 96 students enrolled in two elementary schools operated by the mission.<sup>15</sup> About a year after Pastor H. D. Colburn became president of the Bahamas Mission in 1945, the mission was placed under the jurisdiction of West Indies Union Mission, and its headquarters were located in Jamaica. In December 1947, Pastor Colburn reported that "Bahamas Junior Academy opened its doors for the first time" to 134 students on the Wulff Road campus on September 22, 1947.<sup>16</sup> In addition to facilitating the move of the school from Hawkins Hill to Wulff Road, Pastor Colburn arranged for the Voice of Prophecy program to air on ZNS Radio on Sundays at 6 pm. A branch of the Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence School was also set up at the mission office.

In the 1950s, church membership increased to 718, and Bahamas Academy, the school in Nassau, attained senior status. In 1956, the Bahamas Mission employed its first two native pastors, Silas N. McKinney and Neville E. Scavella, who were ordained to the gospel ministry in 1960. In 1964, Pastor McKinney became the first Bahamian president of the Bahamas Mission. Under his leadership, the Bahamas Mission gained conference status in 1969. With special emphasis on evangelism and improvement in church buildings, the membership increased from 1,174 in 1964 to 3,420 in 1973.

Pastor L. V. McMillan succeeded Pastor McKinney in 1975 and continued the emphasis on evangelism. He introduced a rigorous stewardship program that facilitated the building of churches through the United Development Fund and a united labor program. Succeeding Pastor McMillan, Pastor H. A. Roach was elected president in 1980. He kept evangelism high on the agenda and made a special effort to put a resident pastor on every island with an Adventist church. Also during this time, the Turks and Caicos Mission became a part of the Bahamas Conference, Bahamas Academy was accredited. Its primary division was separated from the secondary division to form a separate school. In addition, Grand Bahama Academy was started in Freeport, Grand Bahama, in 1981.

During the presidency of Pastor Jeremiah Duncombe from 1990-1996, two events stand out. First, Dr. Robert Folkenberg, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, made an official visit to the Bahamas from January 19-21, 1992. He was the first international religious world leader to celebrate the quincentennial event of discovery by Columbus in the Bahamas. Second, Dr. 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 between July 27-28, 1992.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after Pastor K. D. Albury was elected president in 1996, the conference office was moved from Shirley Street to the newly constructed building on Tonique Williams Darling Highway, Nassau, New Providence. Provisions were made for a media center in the new building, and it is now used to produce radio and television programs that broadcast on local Adventist radio and TV channels.

In 2003, Dr. Leonard Johnson was elected president of the Bahamas Conference. He paid much attention to the use of media to spread the Adventist message. Also in 2003, the Bahamas Conference was reorganized, creating North Bahamas Mission that later became North Bahamas Conference. Its territory includes Grand Bahama, Abaco, Bimini, and the Berry Islands. Currently, there are 12 Adventist churches, 3,948 members, and a K-12 school, Grand Bahama Academy.

To accommodate the changes in the conference's territory, the Bahamas Conference was renamed South Bahamas Conference. It currently has 49 churches, 24 on the island of New Providence and 25 on the other islands in its territory. According to the Adventist Church Management System report, the current membership is 11,294. The South Bahamas Conference has one school, Bahamas Academy, which is a K-12 institution.

In July 2010, at the General Conference Session in Atlanta, Georgia, Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission was voted as a new union of the Inter-American Division. Its headquarters is located at 116 Gladstone Road, Nassau, New Providence, The Bahamas. Pastor Leonard A. Johnson was elected its president with Pastor Peter Kerr as executive secretary and Rodrick Sands as treasurer. Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission oversees the work of the Adventist Church in the Cayman Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and the Bahamas.

Also in 2010, Pastor Paul A. Scavella was elected president of South Bahamas Conference. Under his leadership, the conference continued to prioritize evangelism. He also continued using print and electronic media to support the various programs of the church and to offer hope to the nation.

In March 2018, the executive committee of the Inter-American Division elected Pastor Peter Kerr as president of Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission, replacing Pastor Johnson, who was elected to serve as executive secretary of the division. Doctor Cheryl Rolle was elected to replace Pastor Kerr as executive secretary of the union.

The following are people who have served as presidents of Bahamas Conference: Silas N. McKinney (2964-1976); Leslie V. McMillan (1976-1980); Hugh A. Roach (1980-1986); Silas N. McKinney (1986-1990); Jeremiah Duncombe (1990-1996); Keith. D. Albury (1996-2003); Leonard Johnson (2003-2010); Paul A. Scavella (2010-2018); Kenny

Deveaux (2018- ).

The following are people who have served as presidents of North Bahamas Conference: Keith D. Albury (2003-2006); Errol B. Tinker (2006-2016); Henry Moncur (2016-2017); Eric D. Clarke (2017- ).

With a history of over 125 years since Adventism was introduced to the Bahamas, and almost 108 years since its official organization, the Seventh-day Adventist Church continues to move forward in the Bahamas. It is the fourth largest denomination in the country, and it continues to impact the nation through its health, youth, welfare, education, and religious programs. The challenge is to gain more workers who will motivate the members to commit to developing and maintaining a closer relationship with Jesus. There are 61 churches throughout the islands, which boast a combined total membership of approximately 15,174. The goal is for these members to join with the ministers and other workers to spread the message of Jesus Christ through the archipelago.

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## NOTES

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3. Ibid.
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6. Wendell Roosevelt McMillan, *From Como to Hawkins: The Role of Laymen in the History of Adventism in the Bahamas* (Spanish Town, St. Catherine, Jamaica: Lithomedia Printers Ltd, 2000), 2.
7. Charles F. Parmele, "Bahama Islands," *ARH*, August 18, 1896, 14.
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9. "A good report..." *ARH*, June 17, 1915, 24.
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