California Conference

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The California Conference was a unit of church organization that initially comprised the state of California. In later
organizational rearrangements it also included at times Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. It was active from 1869 to 1932. Four conferences now cover the state of California: Northern, Central, Southeastern, and Southern, and these conferences are treated in separate articles. This article deals with the beginnings of the Adventist work in California and developments in the history of the California Conference until it was dissolved in 1932.

Origins

The earliest evidence of a Seventh-day Adventist presence in California comes in two letters from Daniel Eaton published in the *Review and Herald* in 1855. Eaton, located in Yreka, Siskiyou County in the northernmost part of the state, just south of the Oregon border, wrote that he did not have “the privilege of meeting with those of like precious faith.”

In 1859 Merritt G. Kellogg, stepbrother of John Harvey Kellogg, traveled overland to California by wagon with his wife and children, settling in San Francisco. He shared his faith with B.G. St. John, a “forty-niner” (one who had been part of the California gold rush in 1849) and former Millerite who now accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message.

Kellogg then presented public lectures and by 1861 his efforts resulted in a group of 14 believers who met together for Sabbath services. On behalf of the group, Kellogg sent a request for a minister to the General Conference, along with $133 in gold. The General Conference replied that they were not able to send anyone, but kept the gold on hand, promising to use it to send “a messenger” to California when one became available.

In 1867 Kellogg went east to plead his case in person before the General Conference in Battle Creek. He did not arrive in time for the 1867 session but remained in the East for training as a health reform physician. The next year at the 1868 session, Kellogg again made the case for California and the General Conference agreed to send two evangelists to the West coast – John Loughborough and Daniel Bourdeau.

With the transcontinental railroad not quite complete and the Panama Canal (1914) still decades in the future, travel to California was like going to a far distant mission field. Loughborough and Bourdeau departed from New York City in June 1868 on a ship that took them to Panama. They went overland across the Isthmus and then took another ship to San Francisco, arriving 24 days after their departure from New York.

Prior to their departure, the evangelists had received guidance from Ellen White about adapting their approach to meet the new cultural environment they would encounter: “You cannot labor in California as you did in New England. Such strict economy would be considered ‘pennywise’ by the Californians. Things are managed there on a more liberal scale. You will have to meet them in the same liberal spirit.”

Loughborough and Bourdeau had intended to set up their tent in San Francisco, but they were invited by a group of Independent Christians who had seen a newspaper announcement about their trip west to come to Petaluma, 50 miles north. Mr. Wolf, one of the Independents, had dreamed about two evangelists arriving in California. When he met Loughborough and Bourdeau he confirmed they were the men he had seen in his dream. This opened the way for the group to accept their ministry. The tent was pitched and meetings were held from mid-August to mid-October. Even though there was public opposition, 20 accepted the Adventist message.

Later that year, Bourdeau and Loughborough spoke at different places in Sonoma County. They held 50 meetings in Windsor. Twelve people accepted the Sabbath, and a Sabbath School was organized. Abram La Rue, a transient laborer, after reading some literature he obtained while employed by one of the Adventist converts, began attending the meetings and accepted the message. La Rue would become the first Adventist missionary to Hawaii and later to China.

Santa Rosa proved to be very open to the Adventist message. The first Seventh-day Adventist baptismal service in California took place near Santa Rosa on April 11, 1869, with Loughborough baptizing 15 people, and the first Adventist church building in California was erected there in October 1869, as described by Loughborough:

Oct. 11, [1869] was set as the day to lay the foundation of the new Santa Rosa church. When my wife and I arrived at the time appointed, we were astonished to find the foundation already laid with joists in place for the floor. The brethren explained, “We got here early, so thought we might as well go to work as stand around waiting for 9 o’clocks to come.” I replied, “Alright! But if my eyes do not deceive me, the building you’ve started is more than fifty feet long. Didn’t we vote 30 x 50?”

Mr. Walker, the head builder, replied, “When we measured off 50 feet, we decided it would be too small, so we took the liberty to add another 10 and stand the expense.”

“California liberality!” I laughed.
Loughborough was privileged to see such liberality frequently. Another instance came five years later at the camp meeting conducted at St. Helena in 1874, where he announced that the General Conference was calling upon California to raise $4,000 in support of Signs of the Times, the new periodical being published in Oakland. “The presence of God came into the meeting, and in a few minutes time, with no urging, there was pledged $19,414,” Loughborough wrote. In 1872, the Santa Rosa church, in another manifestation of liberality for mission, sent $2,000 to the General Conference as a “mutual obligation fund,” along with an invitation for James and Ellen White to spend the winter of 1872-73 in California.

Loughborough began his first public meetings in downtown San Francisco in 1871, occasioned by circumstances resulting from meetings conducted by Miles Grant, a minister of the Advent Christian Church from New England. B.G. St. John and others gravitating toward Seventh-day Adventism had been among those supporting Grant’s meetings. When Grant left town rather abruptly with the recommendation that his followers join the Methodist Church, about 50 who did not want to do this organized themselves into a separate group. St. John sent an urgent message for Loughborough to come, and many of this group went to hear him preach and joined the Seventh-day Adventist church. Merritt E. Cornell, a prominent Adventist evangelist came from the East to join Loughborough in conducting the San Francisco meetings that led to more than 70 new members joining the church.

James and Ellen White accepted the invitation to visit California in 1872, arriving in Oakland in September. James White observed, “We like the people of California, and the country.” After speaking at camp meetings and other events and helping with the formal organization of the California Conference in 1873, they headed back to Battle Creek.

Organizational History

Less than a year after their arrival, Loughborough and Bourdeau established the first Adventist organization in California. With approximately 60 believers in attendance, a “State Meeting” was organized in Santa Rosa on April 10-11, 1869, to function as a “temporary state conference” until churches sufficient to comprise a conference had been organized. The State Meeting elected the following officers: D.T. Bourdeau, president; J.F. Wood, secretary; J.N. Loughborough, treasurer; and an executive committee comprised of D.T. Bourdeau, M.G. Kellogg, and John Bowman. In his report on the meeting, Bourdeau noted that when he and Loughborough first arrived in Petaluma in 1868, they had known of only one Sabbath-keeper in the county, but they now knew of 75.

The California Conference was formally organized in 1873. J.N. Loughborough, elected as the conference’s first president, wrote: “On Feb. 16, 1873, they [James and Ellen White] assisted in the organization of the California State Conference at our meeting hall in Bloomfield. Seven churches were voted into the conference, and the number of Sabbath-keepers reported as 238.”

Evangelistic Advances. Dudley M. Canright, another leading Adventist evangelist, arrived in California in December 1873. He and Cornell held meetings in Oakland that drew a large attendance, with more than 1,500 gathering at Lake Merritt on June 14, 1874 to witness the baptism of 23 persons.

Also in December 1873, James and Ellen White returned, attracted to California as a promising field. Ellen White spoke in favor of making Oakland the center for the work in California. The Pacific Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, later called Pacific Press Publishing Association was set up there, and publication of a new periodical, Signs of the Times, began in 1874. The Whites invested personally in these new ventures. “We went over the same ground in California, selling all our goods to start a printing press on the Pacific Coast,” wrote Ellen in 1899. “We knew that every foot of ground over which we traveled to establish the work would be at great sacrifice to our own financial interests.” Later she recounted, “Believers were few in number, and we needed much courage and much faith to brace us for the work.”

In San Francisco, the need for a church building was obvious, but the congregation had little money and to all appearances it did not seem possible. Loughborough records what happened when believers moved forward in faith despite the appearances:

On April 14 [1875], the leading members of the San Francisco church met at the home of Sister J. L. James, and Sister White related to us what had been shown her in vision. She stated that San Francisco would always be a mission field, and urged upon us the importance of erecting a house of worship. It would look to that poor church like a move in the dark, but if they moved out as the providence of God opened the way, the cost would be entirely met. Knowing as I did the financial condition of these members, to build a church 35 x 80, where a lot alone cost $6,000, looked indeed like a “leap in the dark.”

But we found a lot on Laguna Street for $4,000. Then one sister promised $1,000 if she could sell her place, and within two weeks she sold it for $1,000 above the price she had valued it. A brother who could not see how a church could be built said, “If the Lord says it must be done, He will open the way.” Soon he received $20,000 from an estate settlement and gave $1,000. The church was erected for $14,000, including the price of the lot, over half of which was paid for before it was finished.

As the Adventist work developed in California, with institutions established and organizational structures set up, the emphasis remained always on mission. In 1876, for example, a Bible institute to train gospel workers was held in Oakland. The California Conference provided board and room for the 48 participants, while Uriah Smith and James
Churches organized during the first three decades of Adventism in California included: Petaluma (1868), Healdsburg (1869), Santa Rosa (1869), Woodland (1872), Vacaville (1873), St. Helena (1874), Napa (1874), Lemoore (1878), San Jose (1883), Fresno (1884), Oakland (1885, now Grand Avenue), Sacramento (1885, now Central; originally Pleasant Grove), Eureka (1885), Calistoga (1887), Arroyo Grande (1888), Armona (1888), Deer Park Elmshaven (1890, originally Sanitarium), Stockton (1893, now Central), Placerville (1893), Sebastopol (1893), Bakersfield (1894), Hanford (1894), Ukiah (1898), and Modesto (1902). Schools were often started when churches were organized. 

Southern California. With most of the earliest Adventist activity concentrated in the north of the state, it wasn’t until 1874 that southern California had an ordained minister in its territory—John B. Judson. Evangelism picked up with the arrival of William Healey, who held a series of tent meetings in downtown Los Angeles in 1879. This laid the foundation for the first Adventist church in southern California, which after a couple of moves became known as the Central church.

These were small beginnings. E.J. Waggoner refers to “the little company at Los Angeles” in an 1884 Signs of the Times article. However, soon a second church group was organized in Norwalk in 1884, and it was the first to construct a church building. Later other churches were built in Los Angeles, San Pedro, and Pasadena.

Health and Education. 1878 saw the beginnings of the health work in the West. The Rural Health Retreat (later St. Helena Hospital) opened in 1878, headed up by Dr. Merritt G. Kellogg. In 1885 the Pacific Health Journal and Temperance Advocate (later Vibrant Life) was launched by the medical staff and printed by the Pacific Press. In 1896 a vegetarian restaurant opened in Los Angeles, together with medical treatment rooms under the direction of Dr. F.B. Moran, located between Broadway and Hill on Third Street.

Adventist education in the West began in 1882 when the Healdsburg school under Sidney Brownsberger. It opened with 26 students from ages 5 and up, but a year later the enrollment stood at 152. Later named Healdsburg College, the school was renamed Pacific Union College in 1906 and moved to its current location in Angwin in 1909.

Organizational Changes. Early on, the California Conference sponsored evangelism in neighboring Nevada and in 1883 that state was made part of the conference’s territory. In 1889, the California Conference was also given responsibility for Utah and Arizona, states as yet largely untouched by Adventism. A few years later, though, these states were re-designated as General Conference mission territory – Utah in 1894 and Arizona in 1895.

By 1900, the California Conference membership total reached 4,760 (second only to the Michigan Conference) in 74 congregations. The conference employed 27 ordained ministers and 15 ministerial licentiates, and the members returned $42,607 in tithe that year. In view of the growth, the conference was divided in 1901. The Southern California Conference was created, comprising the area of the state south of the Tehachapi and Santa Ynez mountains. The division left the California Conference with 3,924 members in 66 churches and companies at the close of 1901. Also in 1901, the California Conference became one of nine conferences and missions forming the new Pacific Union Conference. The Pacific Union covered a vast territory that at its inception included Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii, British Columbia, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona.

The ensuing decade brought a net increase of nearly 1,300 members in the California Conference and in 1911 it was divided once again. The conference session held in Fresno, February 9-19, 1911, voted to give several counties to the Southern California Conference and to divide the remaining area of the California Conference into three conferences: the California Conference, headquartered in Oakland; the Central California Conference with headquarters in Fresno; and the Northern California-Nevada Conference, with headquarters in Lodi. This change reduced the California Conference membership by half, from 5,222 to 2,623 and its ministerial ranks from 42 to 15.

The growth of Adventist membership in southern California resulted in the 1915 decision to create a fifth conference in the state of California. San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange, San Diego, and Imperial counties formed the territory of the new Southeastern California Conference.

The California Conference was dissolved in 1932 in one of several Depression era consolidations of administrative entities throughout the North American Division. The conference’s territory along with its 54 congregations and 5,120 members were divided between the Central and Northern California conferences. This presumably happened at the Pacific Union Conference session of that year, though it is not mentioned in the published reports in the Pacific Union Recorder. A report was given by the California Conference to the session and was printed in the Pacific Union Recorder. A later issue includes messages from the conference presidents of the “newly-organized” (actually “reorganized”) conferences of Central and Northern. Also included are announcements for the relevant conference sessions in the following months that would have incorporated the new territorial assignments, but nothing specific was mentioned about the terminal date for the California Conference.

Presidents


SOURCES

Annual Statistical Reports for 1900, 1901, 1910, 1911, 1932. Office Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Online Archives [hereafter ASTR], https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR


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NOTES


2. M.G. Kellogg, *Notes concerning the Kellogg’s* (Battle Creek, MI: 1927).


18. Loughborough, 92.


