

Turks and Caicos Islands

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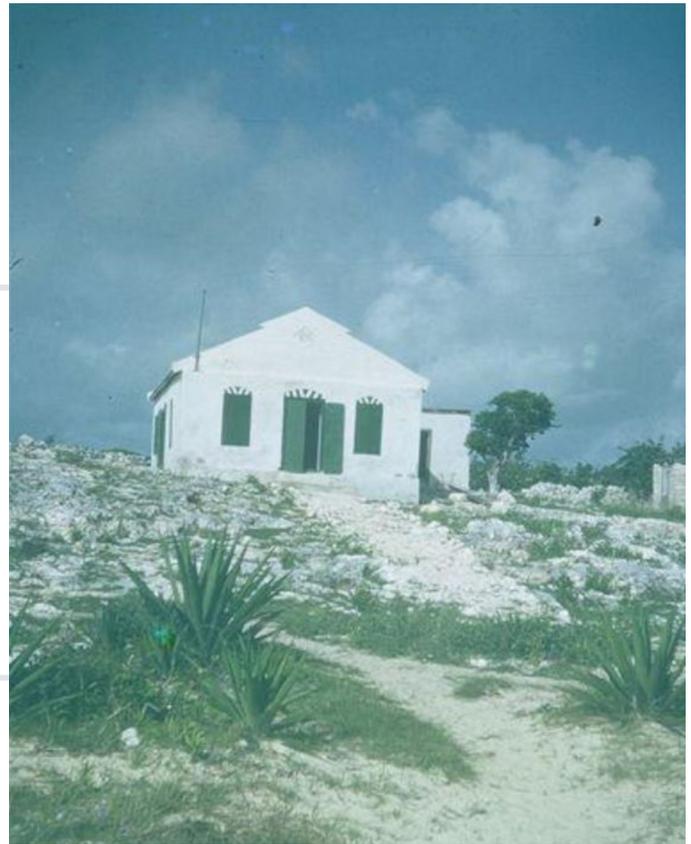
Marjorie Gertrude Ewing-Bassett is a certified Early Childhood educator (Turks and Caicos Islands Community College in conjunction with the University of the West Indies). Ewing-Bassett is the proprietor of Bassett's Reading Intervention Clinic (BRIC'S) Academy, a special needs institution. She has been teaching for forty-four years. She has served as the Women's Ministries director in the local church and the Turks and Caicos Islands Mission (Conference) for twenty-one years and as a church elder for over twenty years.

The Turks and Caicos Islands is a British Overseas Territory in the West Indies, located south of the Bahamas in the Atlantic Ocean. It consists of 32 islands and cays, measuring roughly 193 square miles, (500 square kilometers). Seven of the islands are inhabited. It was first settled by Bermudians and the Bermudian style of construction has, to this day,

been preserved in some of the streets, businesses and residential buildings.¹ Based on the latest United Nations estimates (2019), the population is about 38,271.² Until July 4, 1959, the islands were a dependency of Jamaica with the Governor of Jamaica continuing as the governor until Jamaica gained its independence in August 1962.³ To date, the islands are an internally self-governing overseas territory of the United Kingdom and its parliamentary government is headed by a premier. The economy of the Turks and Caicos Islands is based mainly on tourism, and to a lesser extent, fishing.

Overview

The territory of the Turks and Caicos Islands forms the Turks and Caicos Islands Conference of the Atlantic Caribbean Union, which is one of 24 unions in the Inter-American Division. The conference has nine organized churches and one company, one secondary school, and one elementary school. Two of the churches are on the Turks Islands and eight on the Caicos Islands. At the end of the fourth quarter of 2018, the conference membership was 3,705, with four ordained ministers serving in the conference. At that time the net



Former Blue Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church building

Photo courtesy of Atlantic Caribbean Union archives.

membership growth was 4.9 percent, and the member to population ratio was 1:10. The death rate per one thousand of the general population is 3.2 while that of the Adventist members is 0.19.

Origins of Seventh-day Adventism in the Turks and Caicos Islands

The first religious denominations to have been worshipping on the islands were the Anglicans, Baptists and Methodists.⁴ According to a report in the Review and Herald (November 16, 1905, p.15), "a woman on one of the Turks Islands (Grand Turk), at the turn of the twentieth century had come to recognize the Seventh-day Sabbath through reading her Bible"⁵

The first group of Sabbath worshippers was discovered on the island of Grand Turk in the year 1905 or 1906, when Philip Porter, a colporteur from Jamaica, began selling books on the islands and reported a few converts there.⁶ In May 1939, a lay evangelist by the name of Leonard Rahming came to the Turks and Caicos from the Bahamas to do missionary work. After spending a year and four months preaching throughout the islands of Providenciales, North Caicos and South Caicos, he settled in Grand Turk and organized a Sabbath school there. When he left, he appealed to the organization to send a worker and they responded by sending Clyde Nebblett.

Clyde Nebblett

In 1945, a colporteur, Clyde Nebblett and his wife, went to Grand Turk, organized a Sabbath School in their home, and enrolled many in a Bible correspondence course. While in Grand Turk, a massive hurricane struck and devastated the islands. The storm took the residents by surprise and many lost their lives. Shortly after the storm, the Nebbletts moved from Grand Turk to take up residence in Blue Hills, which is a settlement on the bigger, more northerly island of Providenciales. They continued their work there as literature evangelists, and conducted evangelistic meetings. As a result of their work, 26 members were baptized on that island.⁷ Two of those baptized in the early days of Adventism at Blue Hills were Mr. Hilly Ewing and the lady who later became his wife, Jane Polhamus. Hilly Ewing later rose to become Member of Parliament for the Blue Hills Constituency on the island of Providenciales as well as Deputy Speaker for the Legislative Council, Minister of Government, and Deputy Chief Minister of the Turks and Caicos Islands. Upon his retirement from active politics, his son, Rufus Ewing, a medical doctor by profession, and who also became an Adventist, was elected Premier for the country (2012-2016), and another son, Goldray Ewing, also became a minister of government. During the years that Hilly Ewing served as a minister of government, he was instrumental in gaining many favors that greatly benefited his church and community.

In December 1945, the Turks and Caicos Islands, together with the islands of Mayaguana and Inagua in the Bahamas, were organized into the Salt Cays Mission.⁸ In 1946 the first church building was constructed at Blue Hills, Providenciales, overlooking the magnificent Atlantic Ocean. In 1947, Pastor Gordon Preiner, from the United States of America went to Grand Turk and continued where the Nebbletts had left off. While he was

there, Pastor Robert H. Pierson, also from the United States of America, and who later became president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, held evangelistic meetings under a tent for a month. As a result, a church was organized and a warehouse was purchased and transformed into a church building on Front Street, on the ocean front. That building is still being used as a church today.

In the early 1950s, the Turks and Caicos became part of the East Jamaica Conference, thus becoming one of its districts. Between 1954 and 1964, the islands were administered by the Bahamas Mission. The territory was organized as the Turks and Caicos Islands Mission in 1965 with Pastor V.O. Brown of Jamaica as its president. The mission then consisted of one church in Grand Turk, one on the island of North Caicos and one at Blue Hills, on the island of Providenciales. It continued to operate as a mission until January 1980, when it again became a district of the Bahamas Conference. In January 1988, it reverted to mission status under the supervision of West Indies Union and Pastor Michael Toote became president until Pastor Peter Kerr was called to the mission in 1990, a position he held for 20 years – September 1990-December 2010.

The mission began experiencing steady and consistent growth from 1988 and this growth pattern was significantly accelerated after 1990 to the extent that, for the first time in the history of the mission, more than one hundred persons were added to the church by baptism in 1998. Since then, the mission experienced phenomenal growth leading to an urgent need for church buildings to house the rapidly growing congregations. In 2001, Maranatha Volunteers International responded to a request from the Inter-American Division and met that need by constructing two churches and an educational/evangelistic center which doubles as a church and school building. One of the church buildings was constructed on the island of South Caicos where the members had resorted to worshipping in the local morgue chapel.

Adventist Education in the Turks and Caicos Islands

Adventist Christian Education had its genesis in the Turks and Caicos Islands on the island of Grand Turk on Front Street with the New Hope Seventh-day Adventist School. The date that the school was founded is not certain. However, it was in existence in the early 1960s and was still in operation up to 1973. This can be confirmed by the presence of a New Hope Seventh-day Adventist School advertisement in the 1973 copy of Pierson High School's Yearbook, "The Antenna."⁹ Additionally, Pastor Henry R. E. Smith who served the field as its coordinator in the 1960s, stated in an interview conducted on April 16, 2014, that the New Hope Seventh-day Adventist School was in existence before his arrival to the Turks and Caicos and when he was assigned here, his wife served as the teacher at the school. The school operated out of a building behind the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Front Street and also in the basement of the church.¹⁰

The Turks and Caicos Islands Mission also operated one secondary school, the Pierson High School, founded by Pastor James P. Wesley on September 16, 1968, and named in honor of Pastor Robert H. Pierson who had conducted a tent evangelistic campaign in Grand Turk, and organized the mission in 1947.¹¹ Unfortunately, this

school ran into financial difficulties and had to be closed in 1979. After its closure, the government of the Turks and Caicos Islands, recognizing the great need for secondary education on that island, purchased the school and later renamed it the Marjorie Basden High School. The administration of the school later erected a marble plaque in honor of the founder of the school, Pastor John P. Wesley and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In 1999 a member of the Seventh-day Adventist church, Mrs. Emma Newman, who owned and operated Newman's Preparatory School on the island of Grand Turk, moved to the island of Providenciales. Before moving, she formally transferred her interests in the school to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Today this school continues to operate as a church school and has been renamed, Faith Preparatory School.¹² In September 2001, the Maranatha High School was established on the island of Providenciales.¹³ This soon became one of the most successful secondary schools in the entire country. The school was named after Maranatha Volunteers International, the nonprofit organization that led out in its construction as a gift to the mission. It was later renamed Maranatha Academy.

Moving Forward, From Mission to Conference

Of the ten congregations in the conference, five are conducted in English, four in Haitian Creole and one in Spanish. Haitian nationals constitute the largest expatriate community in the Turks and Caicos Islands, while nationals of Jamaica and the Dominican Republic constitute the second and third largest expatriate groups respectively. The country has become a melting pot of cultures and nationalities, and they are all reflected in the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Even though the conference has no television or radio stations of its own, it has been blessed with the Voice of Prophecy broadcast which is aired on a daily basis on the government owned and operated Radio Turks and Caicos. Several other local stations also transmit programs by the Seventh-day Adventist church on a weekly basis. The local TV stations also air the 3ABN and Hope Channel programs throughout the country.

In November 2010, the Turks and Caicos Islands Mission became part of the Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission which came about as a result of the reorganization of the West Indies Union Conference, into the Jamaica Union Conference and the Atlantic Caribbean Union Mission.

The Turks and Caicos Islands Mission was granted conference status on December 2, 2018. This new status was celebrated with a membership of 3,715, nine churches and one company, one elementary school, one high school, and a workforce of 25. Pastor Michael A. Smith served as the last president of the Turks and Caicos Islands Mission and it was under his leadership that this milestone was achieved. At the inaugural session of the conference, Pastor Steve Cornwall who served as executive secretary of the mission, became the first president of Turks and Caicos Islands Conference with Pastor Terry Tanis being elected executive secretary, and Simone Gilkes as chief financial officer.

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