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Dutch Caribbean Union Mission

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Shurman R. Kook, M.A. in applied ethics (Utrecht University, the Netherlands), B.A. in theology (Andrews University, Michigan), is a native of Curaçao and an ordained minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Kook served the Church in different capacities, including district pastor, Publishing Ministry director, ABC manager, conference vice president, and conference president. Currently, he is the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Dutch Caribbean, covering the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao.

Formerly part of Venezuela-Antilles Union, Dutch Caribbean Union Mission was organized 2015 and reorganized 2017. It covers the following territory: Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao; comprising the Curacao Conference; and the

Aruba, and Bonaire Missions.

Statistics (June 30, 2018): Churches, 37; membership, 9,562; population, 287,000.¹

Political and Ecclesiastical History

The Netherlands Antilles was one country, but after its dissolution in 2010, following a referendum held on all the island territories, Bonaire became a province of the Netherlands; Aruba and Curacao, independent of each other, are now relating to the Netherlands as separate political entities. The combination of these islands, now part of the Dutch kingdom, is known as the Dutch Caribbean. The recent political restructuring brings both challenges and opportunities for the church as the population increases, especially in Bonaire, and the social landscape keeps changing. Presently, this mission field is served by two local fields and a region. The three islands currently represent three different countries, each with their own currencies while sharing citizenship within the Dutch kingdom. Aruba has the Aruban Guilder, Bonaire the US-dollar and Curaçao the Netherlands Antilles Guilder. Curaçao shares the Central Bank with St. Maarten which is another autonomous island within the Dutch kingdom served by the Caribbean Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Church History and Development

The church in this former part of the Netherlands Antilles was, since its creation in 1927, a part of the Colombia Venezuela Union Conference. This field was eventually reorganized into the Colombia Union and the Venezuela Antilles Union in 1989.² For the local fields serving the ABC islands, the Netherlands Antilles Mission was organized and incorporated under the name of “Advent Zendingsgenootschap” in 1935.³ However, it should be noted that the first institution incorporated, on January 1, 1926, was the Book and Bible House as evidenced by the excerpt of the Curaçao Chamber of Commerce and Industry. These Dutch Caribbean islands were part of the Venezuela Mission and until 1934, known as the Curaçao Mission. In 1985, the status of the mission was changed to conference.⁴ Due to political, social, and financial difficulties in Venezuela, the Aruba Mission and the Curacao and Bonaire Conference were reorganized from Venezuela and became attached fields of the Inter-American Division as of January 2014.⁵ There have been geopolitical, cultural, linguistical, missiological and logistical reasons for organizing these Dutch Caribbean islands into a separate union.

Social and Geopolitical Issues

There have been increasing political tensions among Venezuela, United States and the Netherlands. Church leaders have been closely observing this political instability. Evidently, the social-political circumstances in Venezuela have been deteriorating and sometimes seem to threaten the movement of people and goods between Venezuela and the Dutch Caribbean islands. Furthermore, the recent political restructuring of the Dutch Caribbean as described above, is making matters even more complex; in fact since 2010 all the European laws and regulations became applicable in Bonaire.

Given the strong political connection with the Netherlands, one can perceive a Caribbean culture heavily influenced by Europe, prevailing on the ABC islands. Even though Papiamentu is an official language, also spoken in the parliament, the Code of Laws is written in Dutch. The education system has a Dutch history and background. The second most spoken language on two of the islands is Dutch. It must have been challenging to serve the islands from Venezuela with a Hispanic mindset, as well as with human and material resources.

Culture and Language

Papiamentu is the native tongue of most people on the ABC islands. According the 2011 census done by the Curaçao Central Bureau of Statistics, 80 percent of the population of Curaçao is Papiamentu speaking, nine percent Dutch speaking, six percent Spanish speaking and three percent English speaking.⁶ For Bonaire the demographics follow the same order.⁷ Aruba is different, Spanish being the second most spoken language, English the third and Dutch fourth.⁸ Most Spanish and English-speaking people on the islands are immigrants from the Caribbean and South America who came to work in construction, and the household and hospitality industries. The policy makers, educators, health professionals, and most of the people of influence are Papiamentu and Dutch speaking. This language issue has been a challenge for the preparation of materials, practice of mission, realization of evangelism, and other needs of these fields, that could not be satisfied from the union. Due to these circumstances, these fields have functioned virtually as separate entities, with the Venezuela Antilles Union doing its best to help. Obviously, the provision of materials in the people's language is important for the further development of the field.

The situation with the Adventist Hospital has been another reason to establish the Dutch Caribbean Union. The Colombia Venezuela Union, and later the Venezuela Antilles Union have managed the Antillean Adventist hospital for many years as an affiliated entity, and this has created a situation where the hospital was accustomed to union affiliation, and not conference affiliation. However, being an attached field to the division left the hospital without affiliation, because the Division had difficulty with direct supervision for reasons of the possibility of increasing liabilities. This created a challenge, for without organization affiliation it was not known how the hospital should appear in the Yearbook. For this urgent reason in addition to the aforementioned, it seemed reasonable to organize

the Dutch Caribbean Union to facilitate the church's biblical mandate on the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.

At the Spring Meetings of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on April 14, 2015, it was voted: "To grant union mission status to the Dutch Caribbean Field in the Inter-American Division, effective June 1, 2015."⁹ During the Mid-Year Committee meetings of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Inter-American Division on May 12, 2015, the action was taken to approve the Operating Policies of the new union, and its officers were elected.¹⁰ Furthermore, on July 2, 2015, coincidentally the flag and national anthem day of Curaçao which is the host country of the head office of the union, it was voted at the General Conference Session:

1. To recognize and record union mission status for the Dutch Caribbean Union Mission, effective June 1, 2015.
2. To accept the Dutch Caribbean Union Mission (IAD) into the world sisterhood of unions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹¹

Officers

President: Shurman R. Kook (2015 –).

Secretary: Johannes D. Ponte (2015 –).

Treasurers: Kenneth S. Luis (2015 – 2017); Daniel Zuñiga (2018 –).

SOURCES

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General Conference Executive Committee minutes. April 14, 2015. General Conference archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

Inter-American Division Executive Committee minutes. May 12, 2015. Inter-American Division archives, Miami, Florida, U.S.A.

Inter-American Division Executive Committee minutes. October 29, 2012. Inter-American Division archives, Miami, Florida, U.S.A.

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NOTES

1. "Dutch Caribbean Union," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2020), [https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=53071&highlight=Dutch|Caribbean|Union|Mission.?](https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=53071&highlight=Dutch|Caribbean|Union|Mission.)
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd revised edition (1996), 1659.?
3. Ibid., 1776.?
4. Ibid.?
5. Inter-American Division Executive Committee minutes, October 29, 2012, Inter-American Division archives, Miami, U.S.A.?
6. "Demographics Characteristics," CBS Central Bureau of Statistics Curacao, accessed November 29, 2018, [https://www.cbs.cw/website/2011-census_3226/item/demographics-characteristics_760.html.?](https://www.cbs.cw/website/2011-census_3226/item/demographics-characteristics_760.html.)

7. "Papiamento most-spoken language on Bonaire, English on Saba and St Eustatius," cbs.nl, December 14, 2014, accessed November 29, 2018, [https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2014/51/papiamento-most-spoken-language-on-bonaire-english-on-saba-and-st-eustatius.?](https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2014/51/papiamento-most-spoken-language-on-bonaire-english-on-saba-and-st-eustatius.)
8. "Aruba Languages," GraphicMaps, May 1, 2018, accessed November 29, 2018, [https://www.graphicmaps.com/aruba/languages.?](https://www.graphicmaps.com/aruba/languages.)
9. General Conference Executive Committee minutes, April 14, 2015, General Conference archives.?
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11. General Conference 2015 Session minutes, July 2, 2015, General Conference Archives.?

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