



Pastor's home, clinic, and church in Nuuk (Greenland).

Photo courtesy of Swedish HASDA.

Greenland Mission

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Origins of Adventist Work in Greenland

The Adventist message was originally brought to Greenland by fishermen from the Faroe Islands who shared Adventist literature as early as the 1930s and 1940s that resulted in a few contacts being made. In 1953 Andreas Nielsen went to Greenland, sent by the Northern European Division. He traveled to Holsteinborg (modern day Sisimiut) to meet Amon Bertelsen, one of the Greenlanders who had shown an interest in the literature distributed. Bertelsen and his son had started to keep the Sabbath, and in 1954 Bertelsen was baptized.¹

Andreas Nielsen believed in the use of literature and the need to have it printed in Greenlandic,² especially to reach the small settlements that were cut off by ice from the outside world throughout the long winter months. He had the tract "Look Up" (*Ardlorit*) translated, a name by which he was known as he traveled around. Later *Steps to Christ*, the *Great Controversy*, A. Lohne's *Trygge Spor*, and many others were translated.³

Traveling around the country was one of the biggest challenges. Distances in Greenland are great, and often the only way to reach places was by boat or airplane or even the dog sleighs.⁴ Another challenge was that many in Greenland were suspicious of the Adventist message.⁵ In 1954 Ernst Hansen joined Nielsen in Greenland for a while to help him in the pioneer work. It was a difficult time where they met with strong opposition from all sides—but especially from the Lutheran state church. The rural dean in the capital Nuuk sent word around the coast to warn against these two missionaries, who he said came with a false message. In those days the ships' passenger lists and intent of the travel were published, which complicated the matter for the two pioneers. One such message was sent in June 1954 to the Jakobshavn (Ilulissat) parish: "On June 19 most probably 'Julius Thomsen' (ship) will arrive. Most likely an Adventist preacher will be on board and will start working in Jakobshavn and the surrounding towns to win proselytes. We strongly warn against him. About 1840 the Adventists began to keep Saturday instead of Sunday; Sunday which we so beautifully sing about in our hymnbook. They follow Jewish customs..., do not eat meat, which they call unclean, especially the swine. They do not allow their children to be baptized, and the faith and confession we so devotionally confess every Sunday they reject." When Nielsen and Hansen arrived and had their luggage put in a storehouse, they looked in vain for accommodation. Nobody wanted them, not even in their outdoor shed. By evening they put up their tent, while 2000 "wild" dogs were running around. People gathered and watched, what would happen. Eventually a kind former minister came to the tent and told them that it was too dangerous to stay outside at night, and he invited them to his home.⁶ However, despite the opposition and challenges, some people opened their homes and welcomed the missionaries as they traveled around, and many attended their meetings.⁷

A pastor's house was built in Nuuk in 1954. In 1957 Sister Ella Praestiin joined Andreas Nielsen and his family. She started to work as a health visitor from the hospital in Nuuk with the intention of finding out if there was a basis for permanent work and the opening of a clinic. The Skodsborg clinic and a church were built in 1958.⁸ Anna Hogganvik came as a physiotherapist to work in the new clinic.⁹ At the dedication of the church on May 16, 1959, Pastor Magdalon E. Lind, from the division, spoke. A new mission center had thus been established to further the work in Greenland.¹⁰

The Work Continues

When Andreas Nielsen left in 1963 to take up pastoral work in Denmark, a local newspaper wrote that the Adventists had given up work in Greenland. It stated that only the Catholics and the Jehovah's Witnesses were left, together with the Lutheran state church.¹¹ But in the next issue of the paper that came 14 days later, they reported the arrival of the new Adventist preacher and that the Adventists had not given up yet.¹² The Jens Arne Hansen family (1963-1970) replaced the Nielsen family, and besides the selling of books and distribution of tracts on the West Coast and welfare work, this family put much energy in working with children. They ran the biggest Sunday school in Nuuk and filled the church to capacity every Sunday.¹³

After them came Ole and Edda Bakke (1971-1973), a young couple who were sent to reach out to the many young people in Greenland. Ole used the Bible Gift Plan and conducted health evangelism.¹⁴ In the clinic two other missionary couples worked with eagerness and helped the Skodsborg clinic's good name.

In 1973 John Pedersen and his family came to lead out in the work. They continued with evangelistic meetings, the Sunday school, and distribution of clothing to the poor. A little printing shop was set up, and a bimonthly magazine (24-36 pages) *Avangnaata Qaumanera* (The Northern Light) was published and distributed by hand in Nuuk and a further 2,000 copies were sent to addresses all over Greenland. A book *Sundhed og Livslykke* (Health and Happiness) was printed in 1979. John Pedersen reports of the good work between the pastor and the physiotherapists in the clinic. "These were beautiful years where the gospel and the 'right arm' of the message went up into a higher entity."¹⁵

Andreas Nielsen returned and gave another two years of service to Greenland (1977-1979).¹⁶ Then followed Tue and Lise Westing (1979-1982) with emphasis on radio work and health and temperance films in addition to the other responsibilities.¹⁷ In 1982 Anker and Marianne Kjøller (1982-1990) replaced the Westings, and Kjøller put his efforts into working for the children and pathfinders.¹⁸

On October 1, 1991, the national government, Landsstyret in Greenland, ended their cooperation with the Skodsborg clinic due to the introduction of a new health system with Greenland in charge of their own health care. This meant that the work in the clinic, where many physiotherapists had served with diligence and a sense of mission, could no longer continue.¹⁹ The West Nordic Union did not send another missionary family to Greenland after Anker Kjøller had completed his term, and it was left to self-supporting missionaries to carry on

the work.

In 1996, however, a working committee—the Greenland Committee—was formed by the Danish Union to look at the possibilities of continuing the mission in Greenland. Creative ideas were on the table, but the union was not able to find the funds to carry out the suggestions.²⁰ Roland Laibjörn, who was employed in the supplies and utility company KNI, looked after the mission as elder and pastor until 1998, when the Danish Union sold the property and finally closed down the mission.²¹

New Initiatives

Some work continued to maintain the contact with people and institutions in Greenland. From about 1990 Jens Madsen, former West Nordic Union president, visited companies and individuals in the yearly Ingathering campaign, as well as seeing the remaining members. When he passed away, this was continued by John Pedersen, who, in addition, continued to keep in contact by letter and sending literature from time to time.²²

In 2003 Peter Roennfeldt, TED Ministerial secretary, met with the leadership of the Danish Union and drafted a Greenland Strategy with a clear Action Plan.²³ In 2006 Ole Kendel, Danish Union president, and Sven Hagen Jensen, Danish Union secretary, made an exploratory trip to Greenland to look at the possibility of reestablishing a presence in this vast mission field again. Three locations were visited: Nuuk, the capital, along with Sisimiut and Ilulissat. The idea was to buy property for a meeting place, where different activities could be offered. Contacts were also made with Adventist Frontier Missions to find a couple, or a family, who would move to Greenland and serve the people. Unfortunately, with a change of leadership at the Danish Union in May 2007, the initiative was dropped.²⁴

In the summer of 2019, Elsebeth Butenko (née Nielsen), daughter of pioneer Andreas Nielsen and missionary to Greenland herself, decided to realize her dream of following in her father's footsteps by going from home to home with books. With her she took the books *Steps to Christ* and the *Great Controversy* (a new translation), in Greenlandic and Danish and visited Nuuk. She was so excited at the response she received that she returned in September 2020 taking her husband, Tony Butenko, a pastor in Denmark, with her. They continued the visitations in Nuuk, now with a translation of *Jesus: Bible Truth for Children* by Billie Ruth Atwood, as well as the previous books. In December 2020 Elsebeth received a positive answer from the National Library in Nuuk that they were willing to place *Steps to Christ*, the *Great Controversy*, and *Jesus: Bible Truth for Children* in the libraries all over Greenland. When her husband had to return home after two months, she continued for another two months in Sisimiut.²⁵ She was happy to know that some people still remembered "Ardlorit," the nickname for her father. Exciting reports of their visits, new contacts and Bible studies have appeared in the general church paper for Denmark, *Adventnyt*.²⁶ The union committee is again looking at the possibilities of finding people who are willing to serve as missionaries in Greenland in partnership with Adventist Frontier Mission.²⁷

Organization and Statistics

In March 1991 the official membership statistics reported 16 Adventist church members in Greenland. This number declined to 13 in 1992.²⁸ The Greenland Mission was established as an attached mission under the Northern European Division in 1954. The West Nordic Union Conference (WNU) took over the responsibility in 1970, until it was handed over to the Danish Union of Churches in 1992.²⁹ Greenland is one of the countries of the world where the Seventh-day Adventist work is not currently “established” as of December 31, 2019.³⁰

Mission Leaders and Clinic Workers

Leaders With Pastoral Responsibilities:³¹ Andreas Nielsen (1953-1963), Jens Arne Hansen (1963--1970), Ole Bakke (1971-1973), John Pedersen (1973-1977), Andreas Nielsen (1977-1979), Tue Westing (1979-1982), Anker Kjølner (1982-1990) Roland Laibjörn, self-supporting (1992-1998).

Workers in the Skodsborg Clinic: Ella Præstiin (1957-1963), Anna Hogganvik (1959-1965), Noomi Hansen (1962-1964), Tommy og Grethe Kofoed (1964-1967), Bjørn og Jette Kofoed (1968-1970), Tommy og Grethe Kofoed (1970-1972), Bergur og Torild Jensen (1972-1975), Elsebeth Nielsen (1974-1976), Vagn og Hulda Jensen (1975-1978), Elsebeth Nielsen (1978, 1979), Tue Westing (1979-1982), Robert og Doris Svendsen (1982-1985), Edel Krøll Nielsen (1985, 1986), Gert Elkjær (1986, 1987), Lars Peter Jensen (1987-1989), Paul Lee (1989-1991).³²

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Greenland"; John Pedersen, "Greenland, Our Direct Responsibility?" in *Was It Worth the Effort?*, eds. Børge and Hans Jørgen Schantz (Denmark: Dansk Bogforlag, 1999), 65.
2. Greenlandic is a dialect of the Inuit language and is one of the official languages of Greenland
3. Pedersen, 65.
4. Andreas Nielsen, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains," *Northern Light*, December 1954, 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. Pedersen, 66.
7. E. B. Rudge, "Good News from Greenland," *Northern Light*, September 1954, 2.
8. John Pedersen to Sven Hagen Jensen, email, April 9, 2021.
9. Andreas Nielsen, "Physiotherapy Clinic in Greenland," *Northern Light*, April 1959, 2.
10. Pedersen, 67-68.
11. *Ibid.*, 68.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 69.
15. *Ibid.*, 71
16. Børge and Hans Jørgen Schantz, ed., "Was It Worth the Effort?" 274.
17. Pedersen, 71.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 72.
20. On the working committee were: John Pedersen (chairman), Richard Müller (union representative), Pia Elkjær, Anker Kjøller, Roland Laibjörn and Jens Madsen.
21. Pedersen, 68-74.
22. John Pedersen, personal knowledge.
23. Peter Roennfeldt to Carl-David Andreasen, letter, DUCH President, January 27, 2003, Greenland file, HASDA
24. Sven Hagen Jensen, from personal experience, recorded April 25, 2021.
25. Elsebeth Butenko in newsletters sent to members of the newly formed (August 4, 2020) Friends of the Greenland Mission and Other Friends in 2020-2021, Greenland file, HASDA
26. Elsebeth Butenko, "From the Diary of the Greenland Missionary," *Adventnyt*, No 1, 2021, 23-27, and "Christmas in Sisimiut," *Adventnyt*, No. 2, 2021, 8.
27. Thomas Müller, "Go into the world... and all the way to Greenland," *Adventnyt*, No. 2, 2021, 9.
28. "Greenland Mission: Annual Charts and Statistics," General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, accessed November 16, 2019, http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10176.
29. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks* 1954-1993.
30. "Global Mission (GM) Table 1a," General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2020A.pdf>.
31. Only the pastoral workers are mentioned here, but it is important to mention that their spouses also made a major contribution to the mission work in Greenland.
32. Pedersen, 63-73; Preben Jalving, *Missionaries abroad*, Historic Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Denmark (HASDA), accessed April 26, 2020.

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