



Montana Conference

From Facebook, Montana Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

# Montana Conference

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Montana Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the North Pacific Union Conference.

Territory: Montana.

Statistics (June 30, 2020): churches, 35; membership, 4,002; population, 1,074,112.

## Beginnings

Church organization and evangelism were challenging in Montana with its vast territory and sparse urban centers. The first sets of meetings in Montana were among Scandinavian communities, especially in Livingston. By 1890, evangelistic meetings in English were being held around the state, though Scandinavian-language work remained important.<sup>1</sup> The preaching team included the young missionary Helen May Stanton, whose new husband Eugene Williams was in charge of the canvassing as well as preaching himself. Helen Stanton Williams

was a popular preacher and her success in Montana led to her becoming a licensed minister after the Williams family left the state for Michigan.<sup>2</sup>

The Montana Mission was officially organized in 1891 and by 1892 William J. Stone had moved from West Virginia to begin the process of organizing a conference. His wife, Lucy Richards Stone, was in charge of the literature ministry.<sup>3</sup> In 1896, J. R. Palmer, head of the Montana Mission, wrote to the General Conference to ask for more workers, but the GC was unable to send more at that time.<sup>4</sup> For the next few years, the mission relied on a very few licensed ministers and missionaries, ten in total, three of whom were women (Edna Parker, Anna Sedgewick and Emma Shafer).<sup>5</sup>

## Organizational History

The Montana Conference was organized on October 5, 1898. It was part of General Conference District No. 6 until 1901 when, as part of a major re-organization of the entire Adventist denominational infrastructure, it became part of the new Pacific Union Conference. In 1906, the conferences in the northern part of the original Pacific Union territory, including Montana, were organized into a new union – the North Pacific Union Conference. While in the early years the conference headquarters moved around the large state, by 1905 Bozeman had positioned itself as the center, with a school and the conference office. During its early years (1898-1911) the conference published the *Montana Bivouac*, a four-page, semimonthly paper.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with 12 churches and just a little over 300 members, the Montana Conference, led by the veteran evangelist, William B. White, quickly took on the challenge of establishing itself through public meetings and schools. While the size and geography of the state made the practical elements challenging, camp meetings were vital not only to encourage and spiritually enrich the church members but for the purpose of public evangelism.<sup>7</sup> For instance, at a 1909 camp meeting in Helena, almost 100 Adventists (or about 25% of the conference membership) camped out for the entire time. Those meetings were also attended by local Helena citizens, including “four soldiers from the nearby barracks,” according to conference reports.<sup>8</sup>

Women were crucial to the leadership of the Montana Conference, with Nettie White, Sadie Rittenhouse, Mrs. E.R. Farnsworth, Lottie Quinn and Teresa Gosmer all serving as conference officials in its first two decades.<sup>9</sup> Though during this era female conference officials were not unusual in the Adventist church, having this many may indicate that Adventists in Montana were adapting to their context as they established a growing church. The nation’s western states and territories had long allowed for women to vote, have property, and play roles that they were less likely to in the rest of the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Schools were launched in Montana before the conference was organized, and by 1904 longtime Adventist educator Lula White was appointed as the first Secretary of Education for the conference.<sup>11</sup> The Mount Ellis school, begun near Bozeman in 1902, became the center for secondary education in the conference. Although the world wars and the depression brought financial challenges, Montanans persisted in investing in the Mount

Ellis school.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, Mount Ellis Academy made history when it won a \$500,000 Kohl's Care grant by placing ninth nationally in a Facebook competition. The grant was used to make vital updates in the infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> This publicity drew the attention of the Montana media to the school and invigorated alumni investment as well as interest in attending Mount Ellis during a time when many Adventist boarding schools were having difficulty retaining engagement by their constituency.

As the twentieth century wound to a close, the church continued to engage the concerns of contemporary society. In 1987 conference president Herman Bauman addressed the Montana legislature regarding religious liberty during a debate over a constitutional amendment to require the United States government to balance its budget.<sup>14</sup> It was also under the leadership of Bauman that the Montana Conference hired Karen Ballard, the first female commissioned minister in the North Pacific Union.<sup>15</sup> And by the 1990s, the church in Montana had developed specific missions that addressed the needs of Native Americans.<sup>16</sup>

In 1898, the Helping Hand Mission was established in Butte to work for the unfortunate and the "workingmen."<sup>17</sup> These sorts of community services were followed in later decades by "welfare centers" established in the 1960s and 1970s, and continued by the work of Adventist Community Services in the twenty-first century.<sup>18</sup> Montanan Adventists remain committed to working hard to care for the disadvantaged and those needing services, in spite of the challenges of distance and diversity in the state today. The steady growth of the church in their state testifies to the wisdom and fruit of that strong commitment.

## Presidents

W.B. White (1898-1905); J.A. Holbrook (1905-1906); W.F. Martin (1906-8); R.D. Quinn (1908-1909); J.C. Foster (1909-1912); L.A. Gibson (1912); H.W. Decker (1912-1913); U. Bender (1913-1916); G.F. Watson (1916-1921); J.T. Jacobs (1921-1922); J.A. Rippey (1922-1923); B.M. Grandy (1923-1930); J.W. Turner (1930-1932); J.L. McConaughey (1932-1939); J.J. Reiswig (1939-1946); O. T Garner (1946-1954); L.L. McKinley (1954-1958); G.E. Taylor (1958-1963); A.J. Gordon (1963-1966); G.C. Williamson (1966-1972); D.M. MacIvor (1972-1977); Ron M. Wisby (1977-1980); Paul W. Nelson (1980-1985); Herman Bauman (1985-1988); Perry Parks (1988-2000); John Loor, Jr. (2000- 2010); Merlin Knowles (2011-2017); Elden Ramirez (2017-2020); Ken Norton (2021 - ).

Headquarters: 175 Canyon View Road, Bozeman, MT 59715.

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## NOTES

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2. Cecilia Ramos, "Williams, Helen May Stanton (1868–1940)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 9, 2021, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=8AYR>; Josephine Benton, *Called By God: Stories of Seventh-day Adventist Women Ministers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2002), 11-12.
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1892, 29, 79; *SDA Yearbook* 1893, 30, 67.
4. General Conference Committee, March 12, 1896, General Conference Archives.
5. SDAE, "Montana."
6. SDAE, "Montana" and "North Pacific Union." The has conference office remained in Bozeman except for a nine-year interval when it was at Great Falls (1923-1928), then Billings (1928-1932).
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