



Dakota Conference of Seventh-day Adventists headquarters in Bismarck, North Dakota, c. 2014.

Photo courtesy of Jacqueline Biloff.

Dakota Conference

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Dakota Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Mid-America Union Conference.

Territory: North Dakota and South Dakota.

Statistics (June 30, 2019): Churches, 42; membership, 4,002; population, 1,653,665¹

Origins

In 1861, the United States government established the Dakota Territory out of which the states of North Dakota and South Dakota were organized and admitted to the federal union in 1889.² The Adventist message was first disseminated in the Dakota Territory by Scandinavian believers who moved to the territory during the early 1870s. According to a report in the *Review and Herald* by O. F. Frederikson, Adventist doctrines were spread near Swan Lake in 1873 through the *Advent Tidende*, the Scandinavian language periodical launched the previous year.³

Early in 1874, in response to insistent urging from Frederikson, the first minister was sent to the Dakota Territory—John F. Hanson, a former Baptist minister and a convert of John G. Matteson, who worked in the Scandinavian tongues. Hanson found four families keeping the Sabbath at Swan Lake, located in the southeastern part of the territory. When Hanson returned in February 1876, fourteen new members were added, bringing to the total to between 40 and 50.⁴

The work also spread to the Elk Point-Pleasant Grove vicinity in the southeastern corner of the territory. G. W. Pond of Elk Point reported that since 1874 the *Review and Herald* had been received there regularly and that one man had been convinced of the truth of the Adventist doctrines while several other individuals were deeply interested. Pond's appeal for ministerial help was answered on June 30, 1876, when the first English-speaking ministers, R. M. Kilgore and E. W. Farnsworth, pitched what was probably Adventism's first gospel tent at Elk Point.⁵ A church was organized on February 2, 1877.⁶

Around 1875, several German families in Dakota learned of the Adventist views by reading tracts put in their hands by Danish and American Adventists, and a few began to keep the Sabbath. They had no minister until in 1881 when L.R. Conradi was sent to Dakota to work especially for the Germans. On April 9, 1881, he organized the first German Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States at Milltown with a membership of nineteen, and established others at Brotherfield and Immanuel Creek the same year. The planting of Adventist teachings in Russia can be attributed to these German converts in Dakota. As natives of the Crimea, they began to send Adventist tracts and papers to relatives and friends there, and in 1883 one Philip Reiswig returned to the homeland to personally investigate the interest aroused by the printed page.⁷

Dakota Conference (1879-1889)

On January 13, 1879, the Dakota Tract and Missionary Society was organized, with S. B. Whitney as its first president. In the early months of 1879, Whitney visited Adventist churches and groups in Dakota and formed

local tract societies. This organization assisted the early development of local churches and led to the organization of the conference a few months later.

The Dakota Conference was organized on July 14, 1879, during the first camp meeting in the Dakota Territory. The camp meeting was held on SENEY Island in the middle of the Big Sioux River at Sioux Falls. Approximately 200 people were in attendance including James and Ellen White. In a letter to her grandnieces, Addie and May Walling, Ellen White commented on the meeting and its setting: "Our camp-meeting has been good. It is a beautiful encampment upon an island...This is a place of resort for excursionists and picnic parties."⁸

Elder White, the General Conference president, chaired the organizational meeting at which S. B. Whitney was elected the first Dakota Conference president. The churches at Swan Lake, Sunnyside, Elk Point, and Big Springs were formally admitted to membership in the new conference; companies at Finley, Milltown, Maple Grove, Emmanuel Creek, Madison, and Wolf Creek were "taken under its watchcare."⁹ All of these churches or companies have since disbanded, but a couple of the church cemeteries still remain.

At least five new churches were organized over the next few years, bringing the total conference membership to 600 by March 1887. Sioux Falls was home to both the conference office and the Tract Society (renamed the Book and Bible House in 1924).¹⁰

South Dakota Conference (1889-1895)

From 1889, when the Dakota Territory became the States of North and South Dakota, until 1895, the Dakota Conference was known as the South Dakota Conference. At least four more congregations were added to the conference during these years, including a church in Alexandria organized on January 1, 1895, following six-month of evangelism led by Luther Warren.¹¹

North Dakota Mission (1884-1895)

Progress in construction of the Northern Pacific Railway, which reached Bismarck in 1873 and then Montana in 1881, brought more settlers to the northern Dakota Territory. Among these were Adventists whose repeated calls for an evangelist prompted the General Conference to send G. C. Tenney, a minister of the Wisconsin Conference, in the summer of 1884. The North Dakota Mission, set up to organize the work that same year, was placed under the supervision of the Minnesota Conference since members were geographically isolated from Dakota Conference churches located in the southern part of the territory.

In December, three months into the mission, Tenney reported that M. M. Olsen was working among the Scandinavians, that there were three or four colporteurs in the field, and that a third of the seventy-five Adventists were new converts of a few weeks. The mission's first general meeting, held in Fargo, December 6-8, 1884, was presided over by Minnesota Conference president O. A. Olsen. The Fargo Church, the first in what

became North Dakota, was organized with seventeen members at this time, as was a Tract and Missionary Society for the Fargo, Larimore and Watson areas.

Probably the first tent series in North Dakota was held at Lisbon in 1887 by W. B. White, who had been appointed to lead the North Dakota Mission, in association with C. M. Chaffee and a colporteur, D. W. Reed. The effort led to organization of a church with eight members. At the end of the year M. M. Olsen replaced White in overseeing the mission.

At this time, when there was a great interest in the "local option" question on the sale of liquor in the northern part of Dakota, H. F. Phelps presented a series of lectures on health and temperance at Wahpeton.

The first camp meeting in North Dakota was held July 11-18, 1893, in a grove of elms on the James River near Jamestown. The meetings were conducted in the German, English, and Scandinavian languages. There were more than 200 people present, some coming as far as 150 miles over dry prairies in wagons with their children.¹²

Dakota Conference (1895-1901)

Two years later, at the Jamestown camp meeting of 1895, attended by over 200 people, the North Dakota Mission voted to unite with the South Dakota Conference to form the Dakota Conference. This arrangement operated until 1901, when the Dakota Conference was divided into the South Dakota Conference and the North Dakota Conference, effective in 1902.

In 1897, as a result of meetings by Valentine Leer and Conrad Reiswig, the church in Bowdon, North Dakota, augmented by members from South Dakota, erected a sod building. During the next few years the work progressed in Fargo, Larimore, South Sykeston, and St John. In St. John, where many French-speaking people lived, D. T. Bourdeau, the General Conference French-language worker, spent some time in 1899. That same year, a Sabbath school of thirty was organized at Bismarck, the North Dakota state capital.¹³

South Dakota Conference (1902-1981)

The South Dakota Conference was one of the five member conferences of the Northern Union Conference organized as part of the new union conference system voted by the 1901 General Conference. It remained part of the Northern Union until 1980 except for the Great Depression years 1933-1937, when the Northern Union temporarily merged with the Central Union. The Black Hills region of the state—part of the Nebraska Conference in the 1901-1902 reorganization and later part of the Wyoming Mission—did not become part of the South Dakota Conference territory until 1925.

In 1902, the new South Dakota Conference had 893 members in twenty-six churches. In its first year, the conference opened an intermediate school, Elk Point Academy, which was later moved to Redfield and renamed

Plainview Academy.

An Adventist sanitarium and nurses training center opened in Chamberlain, South Dakota, in 1907 under the direction of Dr. C. Pemberton Farnsworth, assisted by his wife, Dr. Anna Farnsworth. The Chamberlain Sanitarium and Hospital (CS&H) accommodated for 125 patients according to a handbook that also claimed: "Thousands of serious operations have been performed by the surgical staff with good results and a mortality of only one in about each four hundred operations ...These facilities together with other arrangements for treating the sick make this the most complete institution in the whole West." The board of directors consisted of C. Pemberton Farnsworth, MD; Anna B. Farnsworth, MD; W. T. Lindsay, MD; and Bertha A. Lindsay.¹⁴

The South Dakota Conference was closely involved with the establishment of Chamberlain Sanitarium. Though it was identified as an independently or privately-owned institution, its physicians were listed as medical missionaries in the South Dakota Conference in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* through 1913.¹⁵ In 1928, management of the CS&H re-organized under a new association comprised of citizens representing Buffalo, Lyman, and Brule counties. C. Pemberton Farnsworth remained, but the sanitarium declined in the 1930s, and in 1940 he sold his stake to a new non-profit corporation created by a citizens committee seeking to bring "new life" to the institution.¹⁶

The South Dakota Conference membership slowly rose, reaching 1,258 members in thirty-three churches by 1920. A severe drought and low farm prices in the 1920s. At the same time the membership declined to a low of 1,178 in 1924. In 1925, with the addition of the Black Hills region and two North Dakota counties—Adams and Bowman counties were returned to the North Dakota Conference in 1928—the constituency was increased to 1,482.

In spite of the low farm prices, devastating drought, and the unprecedented exodus from the state during the Great Depression, the membership held up and even made a gain of 168 in the decade from 1929 to 1939, bringing the total membership to 1,640.¹⁷ During the next four decades, a general pattern of modest gains prevailed despite some fluctuations. In 1963, for example, the conference had thirty-one churches had a membership of 1,746. By 1980, the number of churches had dipped to twenty-five, although the overall membership stood at 1,931.

South Dakota shares some of the credit with Iowa for the early beginnings of the Ingathering fundraising program for foreign missions. Jasper Wayne, a resident of Iowa, owned a nursery across the state line at Elk Point where he raised fruit trees that he sold in South Dakota. It was during these sales trips that he developed the idea of Ingathering. As early as 1905, he encouraged the students at Elk Point Intermediate School to practice Ingathering, in what may have been the very earliest endeavor of this kind.

In the decade following 1900, medical missionary work was initiated for the Sioux Nation in the vicinity of Geddes. This was deemed the most effective way of reaching a people desperately in need of medical care. Because many of the older Sioux could not understand English, and even fewer could read, colporteur work and

preaching were ineffective. Medical work pioneered by Ray and Effie Jewett alleviated much suffering, cultivating the ground for further evangelistic endeavors.

The increase and growth of the South Dakota Conference also generated more conference facilities. A new two-story brick structure in Watertown, dedicated September 2, 1922, housed the conference headquarters on the first floor and the local church on the second. Valued at \$15,000, this structure served as the conference headquarters until 1960.

During its early history, most of the conference membership was located in the farming portion of the state, but by the middle of the century there was an increasing population in the Black Hills region. Reflecting this change, in 1960 the conference office moved from Watertown to Pierre, the state capital, which by then was a more central point with respect to the conference membership. J. E. Cheek, a member of the Pierre Church, owned several properties in Pierre, but was displeased with ever-rising property taxes. He stated that if the city continued this trend, he would ensure they never received any more taxes from him. When the rise continued, all his properties were sold to non-profit entities. The South Dakota Conference was able to purchase his personal home for less than half of its true value of \$110,000. This house provided the conference with offices and a large recreation room.

In 1962, property was purchased at Eagle Butte, then the new location of the Cheyenne River Indian Agency, for the purpose of erecting a church and parsonage to serve as an evangelistic center for the local population. The evangelistic center for the Sioux Nation was moved to Pine Ridge in 1969 and, in 1971, the school staff was increased to two full-time teachers. The following year, a full-time cook was hired to manage a food program serving two meals a day to the entire student body.

Plainview Academy closed its doors in 1965 owing to diminishing enrollment. In 1974, the constituency voted to join the North Dakota Conference in the operation of a new academy to be built near Bismarck intended to serve both conferences.

In 1964, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph T. Reynolds donated an eighty-acre wooded property in the Black Hills near Hill City to be developed as a youth camp. Four years later, forty more acres were purchased, the total property forming Flag Mountain Camp. This facility remains in service.¹⁸

North Dakota Conference (1902-1981)

The North Dakota Conference was organized in 1902 at the Carrington camp meeting with John G. Walker elected president. Conference headquarters were established at Fargo on property purchased with \$4,000 contributed by the members present. Of the 350 church members at the time, 250 were German-speaking, 75 spoke English, and 25 spoke a Scandinavian language. For many years camp meeting services were held simultaneously in separate tents in the German, Scandinavian, English and Russian languages. The 1903

conference session held at the Carrington camp meeting voted the legal incorporation of the North Dakota Conference, the publishing of the North Dakota *Gleaner*, and, following a pledge of \$2,600, the opening of an intermediate school “as soon [as] funds are forthcoming.”¹⁹ From this 1903 decision emerged Sheyenne River Academy, a forerunner of the current Dakota Adventist Academy.

A large influx of Russians into the state due to the upheavals of World War I and the Russian Revolution led to the organization of the first Russian Adventist church in North America at Kief in 1924. For a time, separate Russian camp meetings were held, and Sheyenne River Academy not only offered Russian as a foreign language, but also conducted a department in which the classes were taught in Russian.

From 1921 to 1930, banks closed and thousands of farmers lost their homes, causing an era of financial hardship for the church in North Dakota. In spite of the fact that many members left the state, the work progressed. In early 1925, the conference president, H. Meyer, reported in the *Review and Herald* that in spite of the adverse economic conditions, 197 members had been added to the church the previous year.²⁰

When World War II brought a need for special training for Adventist young men, a Medical Cadet Corps training camp was conducted at Sheyenne River Academy, January 15 through February 5, 1941. Early in 1941, the first Dorcas Federation in the North Dakota Conference was organized.

The conference membership, which had increased from 1,898 in 1926 to 2,401 in 1936, decreased to 2,190 by 1939 because of the exodus that began in the dust bowl years of the middle 1930s. The gradual change to mechanized agriculture and larger farms in ensuing years caused more outmigration, but normal growth had a stabilizing effect on membership, which reached 2,480 in 1951. Moderate net growth continued over the next two decades, with a total of 2,902 reported in 1973.

In 1914, the North Dakota Conference office moved from its initial locale in Fargo to a building purchased in Jamestown where the headquarters remained for forty-seven years. In 1961 a new headquarters office was built in Jamestown at a cost of \$50,000. In 1957, a large auditorium, constructed on the grounds of Sheyenne River Academy at a cost of \$40,000, became available for camp meeting use. Accordingly, the annual camp meeting was moved from Jamestown to Harvey. In 1952, a summer youth camp was purchased on Lake Metigoshe. Known as Northern Lights Camp, it was located just west of the International Peace Garden on the North Dakota-Manitoba, Canada, border and continues to serve the people of the conference.

Between 1950 and 1974, many churches were built or renovated, and several new schools were added. By 1974, twelve additional workers had been added to the ministerial force, including two evangelists. In addition to these ministers, Carl Ludwig, a retiree of Loma Linda Foods, was employed in 1970 to start a trust services department. A new Book and Bible House was built in 1974. Designated The Better Living Center, it featured a classroom to conduct Five-day Plans to Stop Smoking clinics and nutrition classes.

At its July 1970 meeting, the constituency voted to accept a letter of intent from Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Carlson of Dickinson gifting \$1,250,000 in five annual installments starting in the fall of 1974 with which to build a new academy. In subsequent meetings, the purchase of land east of Bismarck at the Menoken interchange on I-94 was approved and 560 acres of land was purchased for a building site. In 1974, the South Dakota Conference was invited to join with North Dakota in this building venture and both conferences at separate constituency meetings approved the construction and operation of a new academy under Northern Union Conference leadership with the intent of opening for the 1976-1977 school year. The Menoken property was subsequently sold and 1000 acres was purchased north of Bismarck for the new academy site.²¹ Though the physical plant was not yet completed, the new Dakota Adventist Academy was opened in the fall of 1977.

Dakota Conference (1981-present)

On October 12, 1980, the North Dakota Conference voted to merge with any or all of the following conferences: Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The South Dakota Conference voted on April 26, 1981, to merge with the North Dakota Conference. A special merger committee consisting of the executive committees from each of the conferences met and voted on May 6, 1981, that the merger of the two conferences would take effect on July 1, 1981, and would again become Dakota Conference. At the point of the merger, the North Dakota Conference had forty-five churches and a membership of 3,316. The South Dakota Conference had twenty-five churches and a membership of 1,932. The new Dakota Conference was part of the Mid-America Union Conference, itself the product of a merger the previous year between the Central and Northern Union conferences.

It was voted that the Adventist Book Center remain in North Dakota and the conference office in South Dakota. The two conferences had already been collaborating in support of secondary education in the building and funding of Dakota Adventist Academy near Bismarck.

Flag Mountain Camp (South Dakota) and Northern Lights Camp (North Dakota) were both operated annually until 1991, when a rotation system was implemented. Camp was held at Flag Mountain on odd-numbered years and at Northern Lights on even years. In 2005, this system was abandoned when both camps again operated annually. Currently, Flag Mountain Camp offers junior and teen extreme camps, including horsemanship, blacksmithing, mountain biking and rock climbing. Northern Lights Camp offers family camp, and junior and teen camps, featuring a variety of water activities on Lake Metigoshe. Due to the diversity of the venues, some campers have chosen to attend both camps. Over the years, both camps have seen substantial facility improvements.

The Pine Ridge Mission supported an elementary school until 1988. At that time, a study was undertaken to determine how many students attending the school had joined or were involved in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The result was a pilot program attempting new methods of outreach. Each year, groups from various academies and colleges brought students to help paint and repair the mission as well as to provide Vacation

Bible Schools and other special meetings for the Native American population. However, interest in these programs continued to decline. The mission was rented out to other Christian entities prior to 2005 and the property condition deteriorated. The Dakota Conference reassumed management of the facility in 2012 and spent several years upgrading and rebuilding. A school was reopened in 2016, but due to increasing theft and vandalism of the property, the programs were discontinued and the property was sold to the local tribe in 2017 ending the church's mission effort in that location.

The Dakota Conference members have always been strong supporters of Christian education, but in the late 1980s difficult decisions had to be faced regarding Dakota Adventist Academy. Construction of the facility had exceeded original budgets, and sales of assets ultimately proved inadequate to service the debt. Ultimately, the constituency voted to close the academy for the 1987-1988 school year. However, on February 28, 1988, the constituency voted to reopen the school for the 1988-89 school term, provided adequate pledges of funding could be secured. Dakota Adventist Academy continues to operate and is one of the few Adventist boarding schools in the upper Midwest.

In 2009, after due consideration and research regarding traveling expenses and proximity to the Adventist constituency, it was voted to move the conference office from Pierre to Bismarck. Administration and staff who chose to relocate to Bismarck moved into the new facility in November 2012.²²

Mission

The Dakota Conference motto is: "Sharing the unchanging love of Jesus in a changing world."

The Dakota Conference mission statement is: To share the hope of a soon returning Savior, involve the youth of the conference in mission, and continue a strong camp and educational system for the strengthening of the local, national, and international Adventist movement.

Presidents

Presidents of Dakota Conference (the southern part of Dakota Territory): S. B. Whitney, 1879-1882; O. A. Olsen, 1882-1883; A. D. Olsen, 1883-1887; W. B. White, 1887-1889.

Presidents of South Dakota Conference (1889-1895): W. B. White, 1889-1891; J. O. Johnson, 1891-1892; N. P. Nelson, 1892-1895.

Presidents of Dakota Conference (1895-1901): N. P. Nelson, 1895-1898; W. T. Millman, 1898-1901; N. W. Allee, 1901-1902.

Presidents of North Dakota Conference: John G. Walker, 1902-1907; C. J. Kunkel, 1908-1910; C. J. Buhalts, 1910-1913; S. E. Jackson, 1913-1918; E. L. Stewart, 1918-1920; H. H. Humann, 1920-1921; P. G. Stanley, 1921-1922; H. Meyer, 1923-1933; E. H. Oswald, 1933-1937; D. H. Wall, 1937-1941; B. L. Schlotthauer, 1941-1942; D. S. Osgood, 1942-1943; G. E. Hutches, 1943-1945; F. W. Schnepfer, 1945-1947; D. C. Butherus, 1947-1951; A. E. Millner, 1951-

1956; Kimber D. Johnson, 1957-1963; Benjamin Trout, 1963-1969; William. H. Elder, 1969-1974; LeRoy J. Leiske, 1974-1975; R. S. Watts, Jr. 1975-1978; Everett E. Combo 1978-1980; Ben J. Liebelt, 1980-1981.

Presidents of South Dakota Conference: N. W. Allee, 1902-1903; C. A. Burman, 1903-1906; E. G. Hayes, 1906 - 1907; J. W. Christian, 1907-1909, G. F. Watson, 1909-1910; C. M. Babcock, 1910-1914; E. T. Russell, 1914-1920; S. A. Ruskjer, 1920-1924; E. H. Oswald, 1924-1928; G. R. E. McNay, 1928-1929; Gordon Oss, 1929-1935; J. H. Roth, 1935-1939; A V. Rhoads, 1939-1941; H. L. Rudy, 1941-1943; W. A. Dessain, 1943-1946; G. H. Rustad, 1946-1950; L. L. McKinley, 1950-1954; O. T. Garner, 1954-1962; F. W. Bieber, 1962-1970; G. W. Liscombe, 1970-1981.

Presidents of Dakota Conference: Ben J. Liebelt, 1981-1986; John Thurber, 1986-1987; Donald Shelton, 1987-1993; Robert Peck, 1993-1996; Stephen Orian, 1996-2001; Van Hurst, 2001-2005; Neil L. Biloff, 2005-current.

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The conference forms a part of the Mid-America Union Conference.

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NOTES

1. "Dakota Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019), 188.

2. Merrill Fabry, "Now You Know: Why Are There Two Dakotas?," *Time*, July 14, 2016, accessed June 10, 2019, <http://time.com/4377423/dakota-north-south-history-two/>.
3. O. F. Frederikson, "Dacotah [sic] Territory," *ARH*, January 1, 1875, 6.
4. John F. Hanson, "Iowa and Dakota," *ARH*, March 16, 1876, 6-7.
5. R. M. Kilgore and E. W. Farnsworth, "Dakota Territory," *ARH*, July 13, 1876, 6.
6. E. W. Farnsworth, "Report of Meetings," *ARH*, February 15, 1877, 7.
7. "Origins" section condensed and adapted from "South Dakota Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition, 1996 (hereafter cited as SDAE).
8. E. G. White to Addie and May Walling, July 14, 1879, Letter 22a, 1879, Ellen G. White Writings, accessed June 10, 2019, https://egwwritings.org/?ref=en_Lt22a-1879¶=3435.6.
9. "Dakota Conference: Organization of a Conference of S. D. Adventists in Dakota Territory," *ARH*, July 31, 1879, 47.
10. Except where otherwise noted, the "Dakota Conference (1879-1889)," section is adapted from "South Dakota Conference," SDAE.
11. Ibid.
12. "North Dakota Mission" section adapted from "North Dakota Conference," SDAE.
13. Ibid.
14. Chamberlain Sanitarium and Hospital Handbook, n.d., copy in possession of author; A. H. Johns, "Anna Mary Farnsworth obituary," *Central Union Reaper*, July 15, 1941, 7; "Chamberlain Sanitarium Boasts of Splendid Plant (advertisement)," *Sioux City Journal*, April 2, 1928, 3.
15. R. A. Underwood, "Report," *Northern Union Outlook*, September 24, 1907, 1-2; "South Dakota Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1908-1913).
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18. Except where otherwise noted, the "South Dakota Conference (1902-1981)" section is adapted and updated from "South Dakota Conference" SDAE.

19. "North Dakota Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, July 14, 1903, 20.

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21. "North Dakota Conference (1902-1981)" section adapted from "North Dakota Conference," SDAE.

22. "Dakota Conference (1981-present)," adapted and updated from "Dakota Conference," SDAE.

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