

Montserrat

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By the 1880s, Adventist literature from the [International Tract and Missionary Society](#) had spread to several Caribbean territories, including Montserrat.

Historical Notes

Montserrat is one of the northern islands of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean Sea, located southwest of the island of [Antigua](#) and northeast of Guadeloupe. Montserrat is a British Overseas Territory of about 102 square kilometers (39 square miles). Its terrain is mountainous for the most part, and its name, given by Christopher Columbus on his voyage to the region in 1493, may be loosely translated as “the land of mountain ranges.”

Catholic Irish migrants settled the island in the 1630s and imported enslaved African workers, resulting in a predominantly black population by the 1660s. There were attacks by French forces early in the 18th century, and a brief occupation was undertaken by the French in the 1780s. However, apart from an interlude of about one year, the island has remained a British possession from the early 17th century up to the present. The migration of other British settlers over the 17th and 18th centuries brought members of the Church of England to the island. An uneasy peace existed between these later migrants and the Catholic Irish who had initiated the first settlement.

Origins of Adventism in Montserrat

The Adventist message reached Montserrat in the 1880s through Adventist literature. On his visit to Montserrat, the pioneer literature evangelist [William Arnold](#) wrote: “This island is so rugged and mountainous that I canvassed it in the saddle, and in my delivery of books I was assisted by negro boys, who carried the books on their heads, while I rode my creole pony.” Arnold’s account refers to his journey by steamship from New York to the “Little Antilles” in November 1888.¹

Letters from various correspondents demonstrated a growing interest in the Adventist message, such as in the excerpt: “I have received the religious reading you have sent me, and I am well pleased with it as well as many

others. I was one of many who bought 'Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation,' of Mr. Arnold, and I also helped him in his work while here."² The Board of Foreign Missions decided that [Dexter A. Ball](#) from Pennsylvania would travel to the West Indies to nurture the interest sparked by the books sold by Arnold and by correspondence from the secretaries of the International Tract Society.³

Local converts became active in sharing their new faith, as indicated in a letter from someone in Montserrat who started observing the Sabbath to "The Home Missionary" regarding the book "Bible Readings for the Home Circle." This person stated:

May my heavenly Father infuse its light into my heart so that I may understand the truth more and more, and bring forth fruit to his glory. I have distributed the tracts and pamphlets sent me, to such as I know will appreciate them. I have also met some who profess to have no time to devote to religious study... My prayer is that the eyes of such may be opened to their eternal welfare.⁴

During the 1890s, a constant Adventist presence existed on the island. From March 9 to April 7, 1892, L. C. Chadwick, president of the International Tract Society, toured the Leeward Islands baptizing new converts. He comments on the importance of Brother Arnold's canvassing work:

Here I find the beauty of our systematic methods of canvassing to be very valuable. Brother Arnold made a thorough work in these islands with 'Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation' a few years ago. Other literature has been sent in by the International Tract Society, which, with the faithful labors of Elder Ball, has resulted not only in leading many to the light of truth, but has awakened a demand for other books, for which the people are now ready.⁵

Indeed, by the end of the 19th century, while there is no clear indication of the formal establishment of a church on the island, there is every indication of a growing interest in Adventism. [Elam Van Deusen](#), an ordained minister who was sent to the Caribbean, wrote: "Some of our books have been sold [in Montserrat] and I have heard that there are interested ones on this island. Here are souls to help and room for a permanent laborer."⁶

Spread of Adventism

From the 1900s to the 1920s

The work in the Leeward Islands began to grow rapidly as the administration of the church grew. Contact with the various islands was facilitated by the two intercolonial boats of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. which traveled along northbound and southbound routes. The southbound route ran to Demerara in South America, and the northbound route ran to Antigua, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. headquarters was located in Trinidad, and Barbados was the first and the last port-of-call.⁷ Both foreign and local literature evangelists contributed much to the early spread of Adventism in

the Leeward Islands.

Prior to 1906, missionary visits were authorized by the Missionary Board of the General Conference. In 1906, Montserrat was added to the territory of the [East Caribbean Conference](#) of the West Indian Union Conference. In 1909, a territorial readjustment placed Montserrat under the East Caribbean Mission. Around 1915, further administrative adjustments placed the island in the territory of the [South Caribbean Conference](#), and J. J. Smith was appointed to oversee the Adventist work in Montserrat.⁸ He played a major part in the evangelistic efforts that led to the organization of the first church group. This group met in Brother Greaves's home until they constructed a suitable building.

Later, J. A. Reid played an important role in encouraging the brethren during the frequent hurricanes that struck the island. In 1924, the church building was destroyed in one of these hurricanes. Reid led the church members in the construction of a new church building, which was named New Carmel in 1926. The building had just barely been completed when another hurricane struck in 1928. "...while almost every building in that neighborhood is destroyed, we praise the Lord that our church building is safe, with only a few shingles off. ... and the many homeless ones, who are finding a shelter in our church building, recognize that this unharmed building is a token of His divine favor."⁹

From the 1920s to the 1940s

Rupert Thompson worked with J. A. Reid after the hurricane of 1928. He writes:

Owing to the urgent need of help over in the island of Montserrat, the committee asked me to go there. I found Pastor Reid with his hands full. A new church of fifty members has been raised up at Kin Sale, about half a mile from Plymouth. There is also a church of eighty-six members at Friths, four miles from Plymouth. I am laboring at present in this district. I have held a few meetings and although the rain hindered and the roads were muddy, a man and his wife have accepted the truth and are faithful. I am visiting some interested ones, and hope to see them take their stand later.¹⁰

O. C. Walker played an integral role in strengthening the Adventist work in Montserrat. D. A. Cone, manager of the Cristobal Branch of the Pacific Press, reported:

Brother Walker, our worker on the island of Montserrat, related to us conditions under which they must work. Over 4,000 earthquakes have been registered by the government bureau since the latter part of 1934. One hundred quakes were felt in one night. Many were so hard that people were thrown off their feet. We were told that after a severe shock the sulphur fumes are so strong that they burn the eyes and disturb the breathing. Surely Brother and Sister Walker are having trying experiences, just now.¹¹

Brother O. C. Walker described the effects of an earthquake in a letter to Pastor W. R. Elliot, president of the Caribbean Union Conference, on May 15, 1935.

Our churches are not down but they are damaged badly. ... I had begun a series of meetings in the New Carmel church. The interest was very good, but since the heavy earthquakes the interest has been reduced about 50% because of the shocks. We are having them still, almost every hour. One cannot sleep all night. Many people are leaving the island, yet, thank God, we feel we are in the right place and we are of good courage. There is not a place in this big world, sir, I would prefer to work now, except here.¹²

From the 1940s to the 1970s

In the 1940s, Montserrat was part of the Leeward Islands Mission territory (now [South Leeward Conference](#)). When the East Caribbean Conference was reorganized in 1960, Montserrat then became part of its territory. In 1975, Montserrat went through another territorial adjustment and became part of the territory of the newly established the North Caribbean Conference. Further territorial changes would occur in the 2000s, and Montserratians would adjust to the new arrangements brought about by the many territorial adjustments while focusing on spreading the Adventist message in their homeland.

In 1971, Montserrat was chosen as the site for a joint retreat for "centurions" (a designation used in churches in the Inter-American Division for pastors who baptized 100 people during the year) by the East Caribbean Conference and the South Caribbean Conference. The East Caribbean Conference Evangelist [Kembleton S. Wiggins](#), who saw over 430 baptized over the course of two evangelistic campaigns for the year, was the main speaker on evangelistic methods at the retreat.¹³

The establishment of Adventist schools in Montserrat indicated the expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the island. A testimony from a previous student of Montserrat's educational system indicates her parents getting involved in the new school's survival:

My parents helped to preserve the one-room church school that I attended. How? Years ago, if a church-school teacher were to receive his salary from the conference in which the school was located, the church had to send its portion to the conference by a certain date of the month. I remember on one occasion the church's portion was overdue. On the Friday after the deadline my mother sent me to a businessman to offer one of our best calves for sale. With the calf sold, the church's debt was cleared. Recently I visited New Carmel, on the island of Montserrat, the site of this church school. The church school is no longer conducted in one room. It is now a multiroom school serving the entire island. Thank God for small beginnings and for the contribution and cooperation of the New Carmel church and of the other churches on the island.¹⁴

The 1970s was a relatively uneventful decade in Montserrat. Hurricanes missed the island for the most part. Hurricane David of 1979 and Hurricane Allan of 1980 threatened but did not hit Montserrat.

From the 1980s to the 2000s

During this period of growth and recovery, the church in Montserrat conducted several activities that asserted the importance of Adventism to the community.

In 1981, Naomi Modeste, the health and temperance director of the Caribbean Union Conference, with assistance from Pastors Maxwell Webster and Lester Edmeade, conducted a major six-day health seminar to bring attention to a healthy lifestyle.¹⁵

Later, in 1981, four Pathfinder clubs held a Pathfinders fair, and a grand march was conducted for hundreds of spectators. The island's acting governor declared the fair open, and Gershom Byass, Inter-American Division's area auditor, gave the main address.¹⁶

In 1982, 400 students attended a ceremony where 70 students graduated from the "New Life" and "Junior Voice of Prophecy" courses. Pastors D. Chatham and W. Webster presented diplomas to the graduates.¹⁷

In 1984, a high point in the history of the church in Montserrat occurred with the governor, Sir David Dale, and his wife attending the ordinations of Delvin Chatham and Charles Heskey in the Bethel church.¹⁸

In September 1989, the category 5 Hurricane Hugo, with winds reaching as high as 160 miles per hour, hit many islands in the Caribbean. Montserrat was one of at least four islands that were severely damaged. Every Adventist church sustained some form of damage and required roof and/or window repairs at a minimum. Four of the churches acted as shelters during the hurricane and later became food distribution hubs. The local pastors coordinated a group of 30 individuals to assist with covering the roofs using plastic sheets and tarps.¹⁹ The actions of local Adventist leaders to support church members and the community clearly demonstrated a strong sense of unity during times of hardship.

Between 1995 and 1997, the Montserrat Soufrière Hills volcano underwent a series of catastrophic eruptions. On July 2, the lava flow was said to have demolished 200 homes, obliterated an entire village and most of six others, and resulted in 10 fatalities, with 20 more people missing and presumed dead. The impact on the island was severe with more than half of the island becoming uninhabitable. ADRA aided in evacuation and provided 200 victims with food and shelter in an unfinished multipurpose center.²⁰ The volcanic eruption led to a mass evacuation. Roughly 7,000 people, or two-thirds of the island's population, fled, and about 4,000 of those went to the United Kingdom. This migration has had an impact on the size of the Adventist population as well. However, evangelistic efforts and baptisms continued on the island, resulting in the church's continued growth.

In 2015, a grand celebration took place in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the first organized Adventist group in this small Caribbean outpost.²¹ In 2023, there were 512 Adventists out of a general population of an estimated 4,000. The Adventist church also had two churches and one company²² in Montserrat.²³

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22. In the Adventist Church, a company is a small group of believers organized in a particular area, but not large enough or equipped to become a full congregation or church. It often serves as a precursor to a church and is usually led by a lay leader or pastor.
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