

Francis, Irisdeane Clairmonte (1911–2004)

JOAN A. FRANCIS

Joan Annette Francis, Doctor of Arts in History, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA. She served as a professor of history at Northern Caribbean University; Atlantic Union College, and Washington Adventist University (WAU). She also served as director of the Center for Law and Public Policy at WAU (2008-2020). She has written articles for professional and Adventist journals, contributed to the *Women in History Encyclopedia*, and written the children's activity book *Sabbath Keepers: The African Connection*.

Irisdeane Clairmonte Francis, Bible worker, director of Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence School, advocate for Christian education, church organizer, and preacher, was instrumental in the growth of Seventh-day Adventism in the Eastern Caribbean.

Early Life

Irisdeane C. Francis was born October 10, 1911, in Hillaby, St. Andrew, Barbados, into a family of three sisters (Cleopatra, Ervine, and Geraldine) and one brother (Carl Urbane). She was the fifth child of Albert Francis and Louise Hope Francis who were among the early Adventists on the island of Barbados. Irisdeane lived in a close-knit community with her maternal uncles, Charles and Darnley Hope, who were active members of the community. They were all members of the Church of England and, because of their interest in service, her parents joined the Christian Mission. Then her father, Albert Francis, visited the United States in 1912 and returned with a new faith, Seventh-day Adventism.¹ He became active in sharing his new faith and in studying the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. By 1920, he would walk six miles with his family and other members to the parish of St. James to worship with believers there on Sabbath.² This commitment made an impression on all his children, who at an early age saw the importance of service and work.



Sister Irisdene Francis

Photo courtesy of Dr. Joan Francis from the Francis family photo collection.

Education

Irisdeane's early education began when she attended the local primary schools, Turners Hall and St. Simon's Girls. She continued her secondary education at Caribbean Training College (now University of the Southern Caribbean) from 1932-1936.³ At college, she started the secretarial course and excelled at shorthand. She returned in 1948-1949 to pursue the Bible instructors' course. To help defray her expenses she worked in the broom shop and printing press and used her skill as a seamstress to maintain her wardrobe.

She was baptized in the early 1920s⁴ and was active in her local home church, Hillaby, when it opened in 1927. When her brother Urbane pointed out that Ellen White stated that "where there are more than six children, there should be a church school," she did all that was necessary, including raising funds, to start a school⁵

Career

Irisdeane was first employed at the Caribbean Union Office as assistant publishing secretary to J. B. Ramratan⁶ Subsequently she worked as a Bible worker in the Leeward Islands which stretched from St. Kitts/Nevis to Barbados. Sometimes she functioned alone when no pastor was available; for instance, in 1954 in St Kitts, then in 1955-1958 in Barbuda, an island with very few economic activities, dominated by the Anglican Church, and not ideal for a young single woman.⁷ Since there were no parsonages, she had to find lodging with church members. In Antigua she stayed with Mr. and Mrs. William Josiah of Old Road and with Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Pryce.⁸ Nevertheless, when she was in Barbuda she worked diligently and built up the Sabbath School, doubling its membership.⁹

As she moved between the islands of St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, and Barbuda, her influence was extensive, and families were inspired to name their daughters after her. She helped to raise up schools and churches, using all the skills she developed along the way. Traveling between the islands on boats and small planes, visiting the sick and shut-ins, she provided needed pastoral support and leadership. She was also instrumental in building a church in Cedar Grove in Antigua.¹⁰ During this time she kept extensive notes of sermons by visiting pastors and notes on her work and activities.

In the 1960s she was finally assigned to her homeland of Barbados where she continued to be an active Bible worker, working with pastors, raising up churches, and increasing church membership. Now on her home island, Irisdeane was able to get a place of her own and bought herself a Morris Minor automobile which she used to transport many to the church.

Her impact as a Bible worker and leader was explained by one pastor with whom she worked, and this sentiment was echoed by another. Pastor John Josiah, who served the northern section of Barbados in 1970-1974, said he "was privileged to have Sis. Francis as my Bible Worker (as she was respectfully referred to) in crusades held at Grape Hall, Connell Town, Pie Corner and Chance Hall. Sis. Francis was versed in the

scriptures—Genesis to Revelation.”

Working in crusades with Sis. Francis was for me a learning experience. She was never far removed from the platform. When I stood to preach the gospel nightly, her seat was at the back of the stage towards the end where she could glance at the audience during the meeting. She helped me with a Bible reference whenever there was a need. What a blessed relief that was to me on occasions! I am forever grateful!¹¹

She had a special interest in the Sanctuary. Her charts and other visual aids, many of which were her own creation, told the story and the spiritual implications that even a child could understand. She was also very good at telling children’s Bible stories with her many visual aids, and she usually carried them around so she was never caught off guard if asked to tell a story or preach a sermon.

Pastor G. Ralph Thompson, former president of the East Caribbean Conference, and former secretary of the General Conference, also confirmed that she was a very spiritual person, did not put on airs, was very well respected, and lived her Christianity.¹² Pastor John Josiah in his reflections on Irisdeane Francis remarked that,

She enjoyed working with one of the Nembhard brothers in Barbados. These pastors were successful soul-winners of their time. They came from Jamaica and served with distinction in the Caribbean Union. I am well aware that Sis. Francis teamed up with the late Pastor Clarence Lashley in Barbados. Little wonder that Pastor Lashley was a consistent centurion. His hard work coupled with the dedication of the Bible Worker bore much fruit.¹³

As a speaker she was clear and forthright in presenting the Word. Consequently, in 1965 the ladies of the East Caribbean conference decided to hold a public evangelistic meeting for five nights each week for six weeks (Sunday-Wednesday and Friday). They decided that Irisdeane Francis would speak for the four nights and Pastor G. Ralph Thompson, who was the president at the time, would speak on Sunday nights. So began “The Better Life Crusade” at Eilerslie, Black Rock, St. Michael, on March 28, 1965. Faithfully for six weeks, Irisdeane spoke!¹⁴ A church was established there and it is currently the site of one of the largest churches in Barbados.

Her leadership skills were also exhibited when she decided to act. When the conference stopped supplying Morning Watch Calendars, she prepared and printed at her own expense more than 300 copies so she could continue to give them to people in place of Christmas cards.¹⁵

Irisdeane had a burden for the seniors of the church and her visitations to nursing homes and senior homes led her to voice the need for a home run by Adventists where the seniors’ desire for healthy living and Sabbath keeping would not be an issue. Her idea was to convert the old conference office which was at Cr. Britton’s Hill into a senior residence. She prayed, pled, and proposed that the site be used as an Adventist senior citizens home. After much sweat and tears, her wish was granted and she was made the supervisor of the Seventh-day Adventist Senior Citizens’ Home, when it opened.

Later Life

In 1976 she formally retired from full time employment, but she still kept up a busy schedule of Bible work and coaching new interns. Her final act of service for the church occurred at the beginning of the 21st century, when she donated the Francis family plot, where she lived for some of her life, for the building of the new Hillaby SDA Church in Hillaby, St Andrew, Barbados.¹⁶

Near the end of her life she gave up her home and moved in with her youngest niece and her family. They were the beneficiaries of her reflections of life and guidance. On October 2, 2014, eight days before her 93^d birthday she went to sleep to await the Lifegiver.

Contribution and Legacy

Many individuals, relatives, and church members, report stories of how she helped them in their spiritual life, encouraged them to go to school, gave financial aid and clothing to new converts, and in other ways helped them to see Christianity in action. Throughout the entire Eastern Caribbean, she left her mark on the SDA church, its members and community.

SOURCES

Greenleaf, Floyd, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992.

Josiah, Gloria Patsy. *Ministry Adventures in the Caribbean*, Author House, IN, 2007.

Notebooks written by Irisdeane Francis: 1934-1945, 1951-1959.

Phillips, Glenn O. *Over a Century of Adventism 1884-1991: Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados*. Barbados, Caribbean Graphics & Letchworth Ltd. 1991.

Questionnaire and interviews in 2013 with: Pastor John Josiah, Dr. Melvin Peters, Pastor G. Ralph Thompson, Layman Athill A. Scantlebury. In the author's private collection.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

Thompson, G. Ralph, "A New Venture in Evangelism." *Ministry*, September 1965.

Thompson, G. Ralph. "Something New is Public Evangelism." *Inter-American Division Messenger*, October 1965.

NOTES

1. Glenn O. Phillips, *Over A Century of Adventism 1884 -1991: Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados* (Caribbean Graphics and Letchworth Ltd, Barbados, 1991) 44.
2. Gardens SDA Church Records; Story handed down to children and grandchildren.
3. From Irisdeane's Francis notebooks. Many of her notebooks from the 1930s-1950s have survived and the author is unable to read her beautiful shorthand. Information from her passport and funeral program.
4. Difficult to ascertain date from church records. Conventional wisdom is that she was baptized in 1926 or 1927.
5. Written account of the beginning of Hillaby SDA School written by Irisdeane Francis. Date uncertain but probably written for one of the anniversaries of the school.
6. Letter from J. B. Ramratan, Publishing Secretary, South Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to Irisdeane Francis, July 9, 1959.
7. Notebooks of Irisdeane Francis, 1950s.
8. Telephone interviews, (October-November 2013) with Pastor John Josiah, retired minister in St. Croix who had Francis as his Bible worker in many crusades.
9. *Messenger*, May 1956, 10.
10. Information from her notebook, interviews with pastors, and information from family members.
11. Interviews with John Josiah, 2013.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. G. Ralph Thompson, interview by author, December 16, 2013. *Messenger*, October 1965. "Something New in Public Evangelism" G. Ralph Thompson, 3. *Ministry* "A New Venture in Evangelism," September 1965, 13.
15. Elna A. Gay, niece of Irisdeane Francis, February 16, 2013, and other family members.
16. Information from the Hillaby Church; her notes.

