

Faroe Islands

NATHALIE JOHANSSON

Nathalie Johansson, B.A. (English and History), M.A. (English) (University of Southern Denmark), currently (2019) serves as the management assistant to the Treasury Department the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventists in St. Albans, England. Johansson plans to complete a Ph.D. in Adventist History in the near future.

The Faroe Islands with a population of 50,000 consists of eighteen islands of which seventeen are inhabited. One third of the population live in the capital, Torshavn.¹ The islands are located between Scotland and Iceland 335 miles west of Norway.²

The total area of the picturesque Faroe Islands is about 540 square miles or 1,399 square kilometers³ and is of volcanic origin. The coast consists mainly of cliffs. There are several mountains and fjords. The weather tends to be windy, cloudy, and cool.⁴ Despite having four seasons, the climate can be very unpredictable.

A Broad History of the Faroe Islands

It is not known who first inhabited the Faroe Islands. One theory suggests they were Irish monks who lived as hermits. This theory derives from writings of the Irish monk Dicuil about the year 825 AD.⁵ He claimed that monks arrived at the islands around 725 AD.⁶ They apparently left upon the arrival of the Vikings toward the end of 800.⁷

The Vikings, of Scandinavian and Celt origin, most likely arrived at the Faroe Islands from the Orkney and Shetland Islands. The first settlement was allegedly established about 825 by a man named Grim Kambar.⁸

Around 1035, the Faroe Islands became part of the Norwegian Kingdom and remained so until 1814.⁹ In 1271, the Norwegian king, Magnus Lagaboter, introduced the "Old Gulatings" law which ended self-governance on the Faroe Islands. In 1274 the "Young Gulatings" law replaced the "Old Gulatings" law which meant only very small matters could now be decided and resolved by local leaders.¹⁰

In 1380 the Faroe Islands followed Norway when it merged with Denmark into a new kingdom and became an official union in 1450.¹¹ In 1814, Norway left that union and entered in a union with Sweden.¹² Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands continued to be a part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

In 1816 the Faroe Islands became a council and remains a part of the Kingdom of Denmark (as of 2018).¹³ Since the end of the 1800s, there has been a movement toward independence. Consequently, the Home Rule Act was introduced in 1948 granting the Faroe Islands self-governance while remaining tied to Denmark.¹⁴

Language and Culture

The language of the Faroe Islands emerged sometime in the Middle Ages and was established as a separate language before the Reformation. A written language was developed in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ The current language is Faroese. It is related to Icelandic and the western dialects of Norwegian. Danish and English are also spoken.

There is no evidence of a separate Faroese culture in the Viking era prior to the year 1000. The Christian church brought its own music, teachings, and culture.¹⁶

Early Religion and Christianity

During the Viking era, people worshipped many gods, the main ones being the Nordic gods. Therefore, they had no difficulty incorporating the Christian God into their belief system.¹⁷ It seems to have been Celtic women from Ireland around the year 900, or earlier, that started converting local people on the Faroe Islands to Christianity. The Roman Catholic faith made its appearance in Torshavn in the year 1000.¹⁸ It is said that the Reformation came to the Faroe Islands in 1538, two years after the Danish reformation in 1536.¹⁹

The official church on the Faroe Islands is Lutheran with 85 percent of the population belonging to this church.²⁰ Other denominations are: Inner mission, The Brothers, Evangelicals, The Salvation Army, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Catholic Church, Bahai, and Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventism

The Seventh-day Adventist faith was first brought to the Faroe Islands by Norwegian born O. J. Rost Olsen in 1893.²¹ In 1908 Wilhelm Nordlund, from Sweden, continued the work of his predecessor,²² followed in 1913 by two Danes, Valdemar Jacobsen and Gaston Emanuel Christiansen (who later changed his name to Westmann).²³ In 1915 G.E. Westmann held a series of evangelistic meetings in Vági and baptized the first five converts.²⁴

The first Adventist church in Torshavn (1922-1932) was named Bethel.²⁵ In 1917 there were 13 baptized members on the Faroe Islands.²⁶ The first annual meeting was held in 1924 with 18 people present.²⁷ In 1930 there were 48 members.

In 1937 the mission house Betel was purchased and used as an official mission house and church.²⁸ For the following 38 years, the mission house was used as a place of worship until it was sold in 1975.²⁹

For several years, the church in the Faroe Islands was part of the territory of the Iceland-Faroes Conference under the West Nordic Union in the Northern European Division. In 1946 it was united with the East Denmark Conference.³⁰ During this time Norwegian Schøning Andreasen (1926-31) and Faroese Niels Johannes Viderø (1931-1947) served as pastors for the church.³¹ Then for a period of 36 years pastors from Denmark primarily

took turns of two to four years ministering to the congregation in Tórshavn and the scattered members on the islands as well as conducting evangelistic outreach.³²

Seventh-day Adventist fishermen from the Faroes first brought Adventist literature to Greenland before it was opened to the proclamation of the Advent message.³³

Literature was always important for reaching this island population with the Advent message. The first colporteurs stayed a few months each year and sowed the seed. In 1961, however, Ib Jensen from Denmark moved to the Faroe Islands and worked as a fulltime literature evangelist for 45 years. He visited every inhabited island and placed his books in almost every home. He stayed in people's homes overnight and ate at their tables. And even though he was prone to seasickness, he defied the rough sea and went to meet his customers. Especially the children books "Skýmingarløtan" (Bedtime Stories) and "Trúfastir vinir" (My Bible Friends) were very popular. He also took subscriptions for the health magazine "Sundhedsbladet" and sold many Adventist books in Danish to the people he visited. His winning manner opened doors and hearts everywhere.³⁴

An Adventist school was established in 1965³⁵ located at Hoyvíksvegur 56, FO-100 Tórshavn. The building of the current church in Torshavn was begun in 1977 and on the 17th of June 1978, the church opened its doors.³⁶

The Skodsborg physiotherapy clinic was launched in Torshavn in 1957.³⁷ The clinic and the school had a positive impact on the population in the Faroe Islands as local people and their children came to the clinic and the school, thereby giving them an opportunity them to hear the Adventist message. Leaflet and book distributions became important ways in which to reach people. Big meetings in hired halls, usually on Sundays, and meetings in the Adventist Church in Torshavn on Fridays³⁸ were also part of the outreach work. A hymnbook with Faroese hymns was introduced in 1964.

In 1984 the first Faroese with academic theological training, Jens Vilhelm Danielsen, became pastor of the church and worked there until 2009. This gave more stability to the church and acceptance in the wider community, too. The sermons could again be heard in the native language, and opportunities were opened for regular radio and television programs for the public. Danielsen was well known in the religious community and was also part of a group working on a new Bible translation.³⁹

In 1988 Skodsborg physiotherapy clinic was sold to the local council.⁴⁰ The school is still owned by the Danish Adventist Union, but on the 1st of August 2014 it was rented out to another local school and is no longer being run by Adventists.⁴¹

The Faroese are very generous, especially when it comes to helping people in need. For more than 70 years the Adventist church has visited the homes with an annual appeal called "Hjálpsemi" (Action to Help). The funds collected are for ADRA projects. One of the pioneers was Bina á Ryggi, who visited most of the homes on the island of Vagur. Over the years a team of three to five additional collectors from Denmark have gone to the Faroe Islands in the summer to assist the local pastor and members. In the best years US\$ 45,000 to \$60,000

have been collected, which amounts to about one third of the total amount for the Union.⁴²

Adventism is still present on the Faroe Islands, but the members of the Torshaven church, which is part of the Danish Union of Churches Conference, are the sole witness to the Faroese. According to the Danish Union of Churches Conference statistics in 2017 the membership was 57 and in 2018 was 51.⁴³ There is still much work to be done on the Faroe Islands, but the realities with regard to an aging church, and the absence of Adventist institutions makes it difficult. There is a need for more evangelism and especially for the youth to take up the challenge of sharing the gospel. Currently (2019), Pastor Allan Falk from Denmark pastors the Adventist Church on the Faroe Islands.⁴⁴

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