



Integrated Trade Facilitation System (ITFS) in downtown Bahrain
Photo courtesy of Jon Park.

Bahrain, Kingdom of

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Overview of the Country

Bahrain, officially Kingdom of Bahrain, is an island nation in the Persian (Arabian) Gulf, and its Arabic name means “two seas.” (Arabic: *Mamlakat al-Baʿrayn*, ????? ??????). This small country (760 square kilometers) is located between the Qatari peninsula and the northeastern coast of Saudi Arabia to which it is connected by the 25-kilometer King Fahd Causeway.¹

Historically, Bahrain was the center of an early Gulf trading culture known as Dilmun civilization, the remains of which were discovered outside modern Manama, the capital of Bahrain.² It has had a Christian community for many centuries, with the first recorded presence dating back to the 12th century. In 2021 there are still a few native Christian Bahrainis remaining in the country.³ In its recent history, as with the other Gulf coastal states of the Arabian Peninsula, Bahrain was a British protectorate and became independent in 1971. It was the first Gulf state to develop an oil industry.

Its 2020 population was estimated at 1,701,575,⁴ half of whom were Bahraini and Arabs and the other half expatriates who came mostly from Iran, Southern Asia, and Eastern Asia. The official language is Arabic, although English is widely used, being a compulsory second language in all schools. Islam is the state religion, with 70.2 percent of the population Muslim, 14.5 percent Christian, and 10 percent Hindu.⁵

Currently Bahrain is part of the Gulf Field of the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission, which is attached to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Origin of Seventh-day Adventist Work

The earliest record indicates the first Seventh-day Adventists arrived in Bahrain in 1955, when the British government recruited qualified medical personal from India to maintain adequate hospitals in the Persian Gulf. The members were mostly nurses, and, although the Middle East Division officers corresponded with them, the first visit of church officials was made to Bahrain in April 1963. No official work was organized at that time.⁶

It is believed that in 1971 four Seventh-day Adventists from Seychelles, including Eghbert Fred and his wife, moved to Bahrain. Mrs. Fred was employed as a nurse for the daughter of the ruler, Shaikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa. Through her witness the sheik became interested in Adventists and welcomed the idea of anti-smoking clinics.⁷

At the beginning of 1972, the Middle East Union's (MEU) Thrust for Evangelism Among Muslims (TEAM) chose four unentered areas, Bahrain being one of them, to initiate the Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking. Contact was made in March with the officials of the ministries of health in the several small sheikdoms around the country. They were receptive to the idea and arrangements were made to hold the Stop Smoking clinics in different cities, among them Manama, the capital of Bahrain.⁸

Dr. Harold Sheffield (Afro Mid-East Division medical secretary), Robert Taylor (ministerial secretary), and Kenneth Oster (East Mediterranean Field evangelist) arrived in Bahrain to conduct the very first clinic that took place from April 30 to May 4, 1972. In addition to the evening meetings, the team attended two schools each day and spoke to more than 4,000 high school students.⁹ The clinic was well-received and TEAM was invited back to hold many more clinics over the next decade.

The first baptism took place on November 4, 1972. Don Yettie was born into an Adventist family in India and attended Adventist schools, but subsequently he left the church when he and his Catholic wife moved to Bahrain. After a number of years, Yettie remembered his Adventist roots and began regular worship and Bible study with his family, bringing about the conversion of his wife and three of his children. He contacted Robert Darnell, president of MEU, to say he was interested in baptism and membership. When TEAM initially visited Bahrain in March 1972 to set up the first clinic, Evangelist Harley D. Bresee spent several evenings with the Yetti family in Bible studies. Later, during the week of April 30 to May 4, Robert Taylor had further studies with them which resulted in the baptism of Don, his wife, and their children.¹⁰

Two more baptisms took place during 1973 through the efforts of Eghbert Fred when a young Buddhist, Nima Shring, and another lady, Mona Nicette, accepted the Adventist message. The union subsequently organized the first official company. Even though it was inactive for many years, it was later reorganized in 1993 with 17 members.¹¹

On April 17, 1973, the MEU committee voted to establish a health center in Bahrain.¹² Efforts to apply for and secure permission from the government were not easy. After being turned down by the director of Social Affairs, Jack Mahon (union health and temperance secretary) and Kenneth Oster visited Bahrain in February 1974, where they spent a week seeking government permission, locating property, and finding a Bahraini sponsor.¹³

After overcoming many obstacles, it was nothing short of a miracle that they were able to solve all three problems. A hotel owner, Mr. Khaja agreed to be their sponsor, as well as to allow them to use his property for 25 years without charge. Shortly after the government permit was obtained.¹⁴ The General Conference sent an invitation to a young couple asking them to move to Bahrain and manage the clinic. Jim Becraft, who had just graduated with an MA in Public Health from Loma Linda University, and his wife Susan, accepted the call.¹⁵

Unfortunately, it appears that plans for the clinic never materialized. Former church members and administrators have no recollection of this clinic.

During the 1980's a group of Seventh-day Adventist believers began meeting as a non-denominational prayer group in Bahrain. They were the Flaiz Benjamin family (from India), Paul Ganta and family (India), Thomas Abraham and family (India), Beatriz Fred (Seychelles), Pablo Penaranda and family (Philippines), and Simplicio "Boy" Polinar and family (Philippines). In attendance were also some non-Adventists. The meeting took place every Thursday evening in the home of Flaiz Benjamin in Adliya. It was not until 1986, however, that the group began to observe the Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Telugu and English song books were brought from India and attendance increased as more Adventists learned of the group through word of mouth.

In 1991 some Adventists who had graduated from Mountain View College (MVC) in the Philippines and Spicer Memorial College (SMC) in India had the idea to place an advertisement in the *What's on Page* in the local English newspaper, *Gulf Daily News*. The idea proved to be fruitful and the small group expanded when graduates from those two colleges who resided in Bahrain responded positively.¹⁶

This fledging group was recognized on February 2, 1993, by the Gulf Section North (now Gulf Field) of Seventh-day

Adventists and organized as the Bahrain Fellowship Group.¹⁷ They began to receive occasional visits from pastors sent by the Section, such as Dennis Pollatos, Roland Fidelia, and others, to oversee and provide support. The Bahrain Fellowship Group continued to flourish through the diligent mission efforts of the members, the local leaders, and the visiting pastors.¹⁸

At the beginning of 2002, the first official pastor, Tibor Szilvasi, was assigned to minister in Bahrain and Kuwait. He resided in Kuwait but made regular visits to Bahrain. During his six years as pastor, various leadership trainings seminars were conducted with the support of the Gulf Section North and the Middle East Union. As the membership grew steadily, a larger venue became necessary and the meeting place was subsequently moved in 2003 to a villa in Segaya.¹⁹

In 2004 and 2005 some Adventists from the US naval base in Bahrain began meeting with the group in Segaya. They placed meeting information on the bulletin board of the Trinity Church inside the US naval base, Juffair. At that time Pastor Paul Anderson was an Adventist US Navy Chaplain on tour of duty for the base. He became personally involved with the group and also introduced them to the Trinity Church congregation, who in turn provided them with donations. They also received several boxes of Spirit of Prophecy books from the US.²⁰

In 2006, following the example of the United Arab Emirates, the Bahrain government changed the weekend from Thursday and Friday to Friday and Saturday, beginning on September 1 with the new academic year. This made Sunday the first day of the week for school and work, not Saturday. The change contributed to seventh-day Sabbath keeping and membership growth in the region.

In February 2007 the first camp meeting of the Gulf Section North was held in Bahrain. Delegates attended from Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, and the main speakers were Dr. Daniel Duda, education and ministerial director from the Trans-European Division, and Kjell Aune, President of MEU.²¹ Several baptisms followed, increasing the membership. The fellowship group was now able to stand on its own and stated that from then on, the worship service would be held on Sabbath.

The government began to regulate illegal churches in Segaya. In response to this, the Bahrain Group began in December 2007 to worship at St. Christopher's Cathedral, the Anglican Church in Bahrain. On Fridays, the compound was packed with different denominational groups, as most churches had worship services on Friday. But the Seventh-day Adventists enjoyed a quiet worship atmosphere every Saturday. As of 2021, they are still worshipping in the same church.²²

Birth of Bahrain Church

The midyear meetings of the Middle East Union Executive Committee were held from May 25 to 27, 2008, in Manama, Bahrain, for the first time.²³ On November 24, 2008, the Trans-European Division Administrative Committee voted to appoint Tibor Szilvasi as secretary of the Middle East Union Mission, effective December 1, 2008.²⁴

On May 16, 2009, the Gulf Section North, along with Tibor Szilvasi, officially organized the company into the Bahrain Church. One month earlier on April 7, MEU voted to employ Pastor Fausto Rocha Farias from Brazil to serve as pastor for Qatar and Bahrain, based in Qatar.²⁵ Beginning June 1, he began to make regular visits every other month for the next two years to oversee the various evangelism activities.²⁶

It was voted by the MEU ADCOM on December 6, 2009, to combine the Gulf Section North (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar), Gulf Section South (Oman, UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Yemen into one section under the administration of the MEU leadership, as a step towards the future organization of the Gulf Field.²⁷ Under the leadership of Kjell Aune, the first Gulf Section North and the Gulf Section South were merged and reorganized in May 2009. The session was held in Ras Al Khaimah, the United Arab Emirates. The Bahrain church sent its first delegates.²⁸

On August 24, 2012, the Gulf Field voted to call Muiyiwa Oyinloye, a Nigerian pastor, to be district pastor of the Bahrain and Qatar churches.²⁹ He began serving in January 2013. Under his leadership many new mission programs were created to foster a strong outreach ministry. One of them, *Mobile Ministry*, reached out to both Adventist and non-Adventist individuals who were not able to leave their employer's premises in order to attend church worship services. Hosting daily morning devotionals and mid-week prayer meetings, the ministry initially attracted 95 listeners, with 76 of them being non-Adventist. Sixty-one enrolled in the Voice of Prophecy meetings which were conducted every Sunday and Tuesday and several individuals were baptized as a result of this unique ministry.³⁰

A literature evangelism ministry was actively led by Larry Querijro, which also involved the youth distributing tracts and booklets in parks and streets. A health ministry called *Health Expo* was also regularly initiated in public sectors.

In January 2018, the Bahrain church was given its first residing pastor, Ajai Matthews from India. He continued with the existing ministries and is still serving the Bahrain church as of 2021.

As of March 2021, the Bahrain church is one of the 21 organized churches of the Gulf Field of the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission and has 91 members, mostly from the Philippines, Southern Asia, and Sub-Saharan countries.

Pastors Serving the Bahrain Adventist Church

Tibor Szilvasi (2002-2007), Fausto Farias (2010-2011), Muiyiwa Oyinloye (2013-2017), Ajai Joy Mathews (2018-

present).

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