

# Religion in Belize

## Country Overview

Belize, known as British Honduras from 1862 until 1973, is located on the southeastern part of the Yucatan Peninsula on the Caribbean coast between Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south. The terrain is largely flat, with a swampy coastline and low mountains in the southern interior. However, the Caribbean coastal waters of Belize contain one of the largest barrier reefs in the world, which is a major tourist attraction.

The capital of the country is Belmopan, built in 1970, following extensive damage to the former capital, Belize City, by Hurricane Hattie in 1961. Belmopan is located near the geographic center of the country, at an elevation of 250 feet above sea level, close to the Belize River Valley. It is about 80 km southwest of Belize City and serves as a hurricane refuge for Belizeans living near the coastline. In 2000, Belmopan's population was estimated at 8,305 and was increasing in size as more people relocate to the capital. However, Belize City, located on the Caribbean coast at near sea level, still remains the hub of commercial activity and one of the most urbanized areas of Belize (about 55,000 in 2000).

The area of the country is 8,867 square miles, and it had an estimated population of 312,000 in 2008. The growing Mestizo community now comprises 48.7 percent of the nation's population. The Creole community, composed of English-speaking persons of African or mixed African and European ancestry, has declined to 24.9 percent. The Mayan community continues to be about 10 percent of the population. The Garinagu (singular *Garifuna*) community, also known historically as the Black Carib, constitutes about six percent. The remaining 10 percent of the population includes Europeans, East Indians (Hindus), Chinese, Middle Easterners (mainly Lebanese and Jews), and North Americans.

The Euro-North American population of Belize includes many Mennonites who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s by way of Canada, the USA and Mexico. Also, there is a sizeable community of people who identify as East Indian, some of whose ancestors came to Belize from Jamaica in the 1850s, others from various Caribbean countries in the 1880s, and still others from India during the 1950s.

English is the nation's official language and the language of instruction in the public schools. However, English Creole (Kriol) is widely spoken and remains a distinctive part of everyday conversations for most Belizeans. Spanish is also widely spoken and is taught in primary and secondary schools in order to increase bilingualism. In certain areas of the country, such as the Orange Walk and Corozal Districts in the north and the Cayo District in the west, Spanish is the mother tongue of the majority of the people. In the southern Districts of Stann Creek and Toledo, there are many people whose first language is Garifuna or Maya.

## Current Religious Situation

About 50 percent of the population claimed adherence to the Roman Catholic Church in 2000 (census), while Protestant groups accounted for about 36 percent; adherents to "other religions" were 4.6 percent; and those who reported "no religion" or provided "no answer" were 10 percent. The government of Belize actively promotes a spirit of religious tolerance. The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contribute to the free practice of religion.

The fact that Belize's literacy rate is 94 percent reflects the nation's commitment to providing basic education for its citizens (primary education is free and compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 14); the church-administered school is the foundation for the country's education system. The government of Belize has relied heavily on foreign religious institutions for the maintenance and expansion of formal education. These institutions provided financing, personnel, curriculum, planning and higher education. The Belizean school system is a loose aggregate of education subsystems. The system was based on British education and was divided into three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary.

This system of government-subsidized church-run schools dates to 1816 when the Anglican Church organized and managed the first public school. Historically, three denominations have administered most of the country's public schools (Anglican, Roman Catholic and Methodist churches), although today other denominations are also operating public schools with government subsidies, including the Mennonites, Seventh-day Adventists, Belize Baptist Association, Church of the Nazarene, Gospel Missionary Union, Assemblies of God, The Salvation Army, Christian Brethren, Church of God in Christ, and others.

### **Historical Overview of the Political and Social Development**

This small nation (about the size of Massachusetts) has more historical ties to the Caribbean than to the rest of Central America. Belize was settled by British buccaneers in the mid-1600s, who used its sheltered cays and coves as hideouts from which they could prey upon Spanish shipping. British influence continued to grow along the Caribbean coast of Central America, while the Spanish authorities neglected the region.

The first European settlers in the region of modern Belize were called Baymen, who settled in the Belize City area in the 1650's. They were mainly English buccaneers and pirates in the Bay of Honduras who were trying to out-manuever the Spanish rulers in Mexico and Central America, and they discovered they could make a living cutting and selling logwood (used to make dye for the wool industry in England), and later mahogany, to their home country. Many of the first Baymen settled on what is now called the Northside of Belize City, where they controlled all affairs of municipal and national government through the Public Meeting.

The British and Spanish engaged in frequent disputes over the territory of Belize, even after the 1763 Treaty of Paris established the former's rights to cut logwood in Belize. The Baymen were chased out of the territory by the Spaniards no less than four times between 1717 and 1780. Treaties in 1783 and 1786 gave the Baymen more security; but only after the Battle of St. George's Caye in 1798, when the Baymen and their armed slaves defeated—with the help of several British naval commanders—a Spanish naval force from Mexico, did the Baymen have full control of their settlement, which was affirmed by its admission to British Colonial status in 1863 as the Colony of British Honduras. The anniversary of this famous battle is now a national holiday in Belize.

It was the Baymen who established the slavery system in Belize in order to provide a work force for the logwood trade. The imported African slaves, acquired mainly from the British-controlled areas of the Caribbean, were not allowed to own land and had to depend on their slave masters for all their supplies, but they could associate with each other. Before the arrival of 2,207 slaves and freedmen (former slaves) from the Misquito Coast in 1787, the Baymen of Belize numbered fewer than 800 and had no more than 2,600 slaves.

Although slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1838, this did little to change working conditions for laborers in the Belize settlement, who primarily worked in the logging

industry. In order to ensure the continued presence of a viable labor force, the civil authorities established restrictions that limited the ability of individuals to obtain land (1838-1868), thereby creating a debt-peonage system to organize the newly-freed slaves. Because the elite controlled the settlement's land and commerce, the former slaves had to support themselves by subsistence agriculture and by working for wages in the mahogany logging trade.

After the independence of Central America from Spanish rule in 1821, the British government claimed the right to administer part of the Caribbean coast of Central America, from Belize in the north to Nicaragua in the south, where British colonies had previously been established. In 1862-1863, Great Britain formally declared Belize a Crown Colony, subordinate to the colonial government of Jamaica, and renamed it British Honduras.

The Great Depression of the 1930s caused a near-collapse of the colonial economy as the demand for timber plummeted in Britain and elsewhere, which created widespread unemployment. The situation worsened after a devastating hurricane struck the colony in 1931. Perceptions that the government's relief effort was inadequate were aggravated by its refusal to legalize labor unions or to approve a minimum wage. A series of public demonstrations and riots in 1934 marked the beginning of an independence movement in Belize.

Economic conditions in Belize improved during World War II (1939-1945) when many Belizean men entered the British armed forces or were able to acquire jobs that contributed to the war effort. After 1945, the colony's economy again stagnated, especially after Britain devalued the British Honduras currency in 1949. This situation led to the creation of the People's Committee, which demanded independence from Great Britain.

In January 1964, British Honduras became a self-governing Colony and was renamed "Belize" on June 1, 1973; it was the United Kingdom of Great Britain's (UK) last colony on the American mainland. Full independence from the UK was achieved on September 21, 1981, after delays caused by territory disputes with the Republic of Guatemala, which did not formally recognize Belizean independence.

Today, Belize is a constitutional monarchy and a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. George C. Price became the new nation's first Prime Minister under the banner of the People's United Party (PUP), founded in 1950 with a Christian Democrat ideology and devoted to achieving political and economic independence of the British colony. The other major political party today is the United Democratic Party (UDP), created in 1973 with a Social Democrat ideology, under the leadership of Phillip Godson (formerly of the National Independence Party), Dean Lindo (formerly of the People's Development Movement) and Manuel Esquivel (formerly of the Liberal Party).

Under Price's leadership, the PUP won all elections until 1984; in that election the PUP was defeated by the UDP, and Manuel Esquivel became Prime Minister. Price returned to power after elections in 1989. The UDP regained power in the 1993 national elections, and Esquivel became Prime Minister for a second time. The PUP won a landslide victory in the 1998 national elections, and PUP leader Said Musa was named Prime Minister. In the 2003 elections, the PUP won a majority of the votes and Musa continued as Prime Minister. One of his campaign promises was to improve living conditions in the underdeveloped and largely inaccessible southern part of the country. By 2005, there was general discontent with the PUP government, including tax increases in the national budget. The UDP won the 2008 elections, and attorney Dean Oliver Barrow became the nation's first black Prime Minister.

Today, the nation's economy is less dependent on forestry products and more dependent on exports of sugar, citrus, bananas, mangoes, rice, honey and other agricultural and fishery

products, as well as on the growth of the tourism and garment (sewn from imported textiles) industries.

Belizean society evolved as an English-speaking Caribbean cultural blend of various races and nationalities. Because of British influence, Belize is the only country in Central America where English is the national language and Protestantism has been the dominant religion. However, due to the large-scale immigration of Spanish-speaking peoples from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the size of the Spanish-speaking population had increased to about half of the nation's total population in 2000 and the size of the Roman Catholic population has grown correspondingly.

### **The Roman Catholic Church**

Although the Roman Catholic Church was not officially present in British Honduras until 1851, when the first Catholic missionaries arrived, by 1860 the Catholic community in Belize City accounted for 15 percent of the total population. However, the growth of the Catholic Church in Belize prior to 1900 occurred chiefly among the Amerindian, Mestizo and Garifuna peoples in rural areas, and not among the Creoles in Belize City. Even as the early Protestant denominations in Belize mainly grew from the influx of Afro-European immigrants (called West Indians or Creoles) from the British-controlled islands of the Caribbean, so also the Catholic Church there increased principally due to the influx of Mayan refugees from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula who settled in the northern lowlands of Belize during the late 1840s, as well as from the immigration of other Amerindian and Mestizo peoples from Guatemala after 1850.

The missionary zeal of the early Jesuits (Society of Jesus) from Jamaica, England and Italy prior to the 1890s, and of the American Jesuits from the Society of Jesus' Missouri Province since 1893, has strengthened the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Belize, especially among the Mestizos, Amerindians and Garifuna. The Vicariate Apostolic of British Honduras was created in 1893, but it was not until 1956 that a Bishopric was organized there. The Jesuits, aided by other religious orders, established schools and social ministries, in addition to parish churches, throughout the country among the various ethnic groups.

There were few, if any, Roman Catholics among the early settlers of Belize. In 1837, Belize became part of the new Vicariate of Jamaica, with the Very Rev. Benito Fernández (a Spanish Franciscan), as its first vicar (1837-1855). In 1848 the mission received its first notable influx of Catholics, mainly from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula; about 7,000 Mestizos took refuge in British Honduras to escape the so-called Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1901). This war was an uprising by ethnic Mayans against the Mestizo population of European descent (called *Yucatecos*) for political and economic control of the Yucatán Peninsula, which was an ancient center of Mayan civilization (ca. 500-1546 C.E.).

Some Jesuits who passed through the colony in 1850 were asked by the newly-arrived Catholics from Mexico to have priests sent to them. As a result of their intervention, the Vicar Apostolic of Jamaica (Bishop Benito Fernández) visited Belize, accompanied by Friar James Eustace DuPeyron (a Jamaican Jesuit) who built the first Catholic church in 1851. This is considered the founding date of the Belize Catholic Mission. The Very Rev. James Eustace DuPeyron, S.J., became head of the Vicariate of Jamaica in 1855. He visited the Belize Catholic Mission several times until 1871, when he resigned his office and was succeeded by the Very Rev. Joseph Woollett, S.J.

Later, because of the difficulty of communication between Jamaica and British Honduras, the latter territory was separated from the Vicariate of Jamaica. This led to the establishment of

the Prefecture Apostolic of British Honduras in 1888, which was headed by the Rev. Salvatore di Pietro (a Sicilian Jesuit) from 1869, with several interruptions, until 1893, when he was appointed the Vicar Apostolic of British Honduras. The Rev. Salvatore di Pietro was consecrated Bishop in April of that year in Belize, and served in that capacity until his death in 1898. He was succeeded by the Rev. Frederick Charles Hopkins, an English Jesuit. In 1925, the name of the diocese was changed to the Vicariate Apostolic of Belize and was administered under the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Kingston in Jamaica.

A few months after the consecration of Bishop Salvatore di Pietro in 1893, the Belize Catholic Mission was removed from the care of the English province of the Society of Jesus, and attached to the Missouri province. This resulted in more priests coming to serve in the Belize Mission, and new residences were built for them. Ten years previously, in January 1883, several Sisters of Mercy had come to Belize from New Orleans and had opened a convent for girls. A school for boys was established in 1887 by the Rev. Cassian Gillett, an English Jesuit; this institution was replaced nine years later by St. John Berchmans' College, established in 1896. In May 1898, the Sisters of the Holy Family (an Afro-American religious order) arrived from New Orleans and began a teaching ministry in Dangriga among the Garifuna.

In 1900, most of the Catholic population of the vicariate was scattered throughout the territory in small villages. There were few roads at that time; communication was by boat via the waterways or on horseback through the dense tropical bush. The diversity of language presented another obstacle, because the population was (and still is) very heterogeneous; most lived in conditions of poverty.

Diverse tensions arose within the Roman Catholic Church in Central America during the 1960s and following years, because of challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. These powerful new currents polarized Catholic bishops, priests (diocesan and religious), lay brothers and sisters (members of religious orders), and the laity in general into various factions. *Traditionalists* wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s), with an emphasis on apostolic authority, orthodox theology, the sacraments and personal piety. *Reformers* generally supported the Church's modern, post-Vatican II stance of modernization and toleration of diversity based on its official Social Doctrine. *Progressives*, inspired by reforms approved at the Vatican II and Medellín conferences, sought to implement the new vision for "a preferential option for the poor" through social and political action aimed at transforming society and establishing greater social justice through peaceful democratic means. *Radicals* adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing Central American dictatorships and creating Socialist states that would serve the poor marginalized masses. *Charismatic agents* sought to transform the spiritual and communal life of Catholics by means of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the "baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues"), rather than by political and social activism.

Today, the Diocese of Belize City-Belmopan is subordinate to the Archdiocese of Kingston (Jamaica) and a member of the Antilles Episcopal Conference. Bishop Dorick Wright replaced Bishop O.P. Martin as head of the Diocese of Belize City-Belmopan in January 2007. In 2006, the Diocese had a total of only 13 parishes, served by 17 diocesan and 13 religious priests, in addition to 16 religious brothers and 49 religious sisters (nuns) in Belize. The cathedral of the diocese is Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Belize City (first built in 1858, rebuilt several

times, and consecrated as a cathedral in 1894); and Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral in Belmopan is the co-cathedral of the diocese.

Catholics predominate in every administrative district, with the exception of the District of Belize, where 55 percent of the population is Protestant and largely Creole. As the Mestizo and Amerindian segments of the population increase during coming years, along with a corresponding decrease in the proportion that is Creole, the size of the Catholic Community will tend to increase as well.

## **The Protestant Movement**

Protestant missionary efforts were first begun in British Honduras by the Anglican Church (also known as the Church of England), which is now part of the Church of the Province of the West Indies. This jurisdiction includes the Caribbean islands as well as Guyana and Surinam, with headquarters in Nassau, in the Bahamas. Anglican chaplains were first sent to the Colony of British Honduras in the 1770s by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to attend to the spiritual needs of the British colonists and military garrison concentrated in Belize Town, a former pirate enclave at the mouth of the Belize River, probably founded in 1638.

Until the 1860s the Anglican Church (supported by the British colonial government) dominated the religious life of the colonists, which was centered in Belize Town as St. John's Anglican Cathedral, built in 1815. The size of the Anglican community in Belize has gradually increased over the years, mainly due to natural population growth. From about 12,000 adherents in 1936, the number of Anglicans increased to 17,783, according to the 1970 census. In 1980, there were about 16,894 adherents, scattered among 26 organized parishes and mission stations, and the Anglican Church operated 23 primary schools and two secondary schools in Belize. However, according to the 2000 census, there were a total of 12,386 Anglican adherents in Belize, which means that many former Anglicans may have joined other churches or reported "no religion."

During the early 1800s, groups of English nonconformists or dissenters (meaning non-Anglicans) began arriving in British Honduras, which led to a progressive erosion of Anglican influence even though it was the Established Church. English Baptist and Methodist missionaries were sent to the colony in 1822 and 1824, respectively, and Scottish Presbyterian laymen began work in Belize Town in 1825. St. Andrews Presbyterian Church was formally established in the 1850s. By 1856, the Protestant community of Belize Town, where most of the inhabitants of the colony resided, included 2,500 Anglicans, 500 Methodists, 500 Baptists, and 200 Presbyterians, in addition to 1,000 Roman Catholics and 2,260 "others" in a total population of about 7,000 people.

The origin of British Methodist work in Belize is attributed to a British merchant, William Jeckel, who arrived in the early 1800s and was instrumental in organizing Methodist societies in Belize Town, Burrell Boom, and Freetown. In 1824, Jeckel requested help from the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in England, which soon sent three missionaries to the colony. In 1829, Methodist work consisted of one small chapel in Belize City and a few preaching points along the inland rivers. According to Kenneth Grubb (1937), the British and Foreign Bible Society began colportage work in the Colony in 1819 with the help of the Methodists.

Early Methodist missionary endeavors in Belize were plagued by sickness and death, storms and fires, staff shortages and financial hardships, and membership growth and decline for more than a century. In 1913, the British Methodist District of the Wesleyan Methodist Church

consisted of 2,000 communicant members and was served by nine ministers, including three native Belizeans.

After the withdrawal of the Wesleyan Missionary Society from the western Caribbean in 1930, the British Honduras District was under the supervision of the Methodist Church in Jamaica from 1932 to 1952. In 1967, the Belize-Honduras District became a founding member of the autonomous Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, with headquarters in St. Johns, Antigua, in the West Indies. In 1960 there were 1,800 communicant members among the 15 Methodist congregations in Belize; in 1978, 22 churches were reported with about 1,700 communicant members; and in 2000 the situation was about the same.

The London-based Baptist Missionary Society began work in Belize City in 1822, with the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bourne, not to serve the spiritual needs of the English colonists but to Christianize their slaves and freedmen. In 1832, the population of the Colony of Belize totaled about 4,550, which included 2,100 slaves, 2,200 free African people, and fewer than 300 whites.

The Baptists shared a similar history of trials and tribulations with the Methodists, in an inhospitable climate that caused much sickness and death among the early missionaries. Bourne organized the First Baptist Church in 1825 and served a small congregation of 20 members until leaving the Colony in 1834. Another Englishman, Alexander Henderson, arrived in late 1834 to continue the work of evangelism among slaves, soldiers, and discharged prisoners in the poorer sections of Belize Town.

Henderson was assisted by other missionaries from England during the 1840s, but not without controversy. Because Henderson practiced "closed communion" (only baptized Baptists could receive the Lord's Supper), several new recruits from the Baptist Missionary Society refused to work with him. Henderson was forced to resign from the Mission in 1850, but he soon organized the Independent Baptist Mission of Belize with the support of most of his former members. Consequently, the Baptist Missionary Society decided to abandon Belize, recalled its missionaries and sold its properties, leaving Henderson as the uncontested leader of the Baptist movement. In 1850, Baptist work in Belize included two organized churches, seven preaching stations, three day schools, five Sunday schools, and about 230 baptized members. Henderson pioneered the founding of the Queen Street Baptist Church in 1850, which he pastored from 1850 to 1879.

During the late 1830s, a young English seaman, Frederick Crowe (born in 1819 to English parents while living in Belgium; see Crowe's *The Gospel in Central America*, published in London by Charles Gilpin in 1850), became interested in Henderson's work, was converted to Christianity and joined the Baptist Church. Crowe, with some formal education in English and French, became a teacher in the Baptist school and, later, served as an evangelist and missionary with the Belize Baptist Mission. Between 1841 and 1846, Crowe was a traveling agent for the British Honduran Bible Society; in 1843, he became the first Protestant missionary to work in Guatemala. Although Crowe was expelled from Guatemala by the government in April 1846, he and Henderson, together with other helpers, distributed at least 2,000 Spanish and 500 English New Testaments during the mid-1840s in both countries.

Following Henderson's retirement in 1879 due to failing health, Baptist work was carried on by laypeople until the arrival of missionary David Waring from England in 1881. Waring continued the work begun by his predecessors, including outreach to the Yucatecan Maya in the north and the Garifuna in the south, as well as supporting Baptist work in the Bay Islands of Honduras, begun by Mr. and Mrs. John Warner in 1849. Waring sought assistance from the

Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society, which sent James Bryant to Belize in 1886. When Waring returned to England in 1888, Bryant was placed in charge of the Belize Baptist Mission.

Encouraged by Bryant, the Jamaican Society was invited to assume responsibility for the Belize field. Soon thereafter, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Brown arrived from Jamaica along with their nephew, Robert Cleghorn, to administer the work in Belize, which began to prosper under the new leadership. By 1901, the Baptist Mission reported 353 baptized members and 1,324 adherents among nine organized congregations, along with six schools and more than 600 children enrolled. After Brown's retirement in 1901 due to poor health, Cleghorn became the chief head pastor and superintendent of the Baptist Mission in a distinguished career that ended in 1939, after celebrating his fiftieth year of service in Belize. To commemorate the occasion, Cleghorn wrote *A Brief History of Baptist Missionary Work in British Honduras (1822–1939)*.

Two major events occurred that seriously affected Baptist Mission work, as well as that of all Protestant Churches in Belize. The first was World War I, from 1914-1918. Many young men from Belize served with British troops during the war, only to return home restless and unsettled to face unemployment and economic decline in the Colony. Consequently, many Belizeans emigrated to other countries, mainly the USA, hoping to improve their socio-economic status. This trend was accentuated by the combined impact of the Great Hurricane of 1931 that brought death and destruction, and the Great Depression of the 1930s that created economic disaster in Belize.

Not much is known about Baptist work in Belize between 1940 and 1960, but in 1960 the Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society (from the USA) was invited to work with the Belize Baptist Mission. The N. T. Dellingers arrived soon thereafter to supervise the work and rebuild the ministry. By 1978 there were six organized churches and 330 baptized members, mainly among the Creoles. Several missionaries associated with the Southern Baptist Convention arrived in Belize in 1977 to begin work in the interior and to assist with Baptist work in Belize City. The independent Big Falls Baptist Church was organized in 1975 by missionary Mike Willis; and Outreach For Belize was established in 1977 by an independent Baptist missionary, John Collier. Missionaries associated with Baptist Bible Fellowship arrived in 1979 and began an independent ministry. In 2000, there was a total of 25 Baptist congregations in Belize with about 2,500 baptized members. According to the 2000 census, there were 8,077 Baptist adherents.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church entered Belize in early 1900s as an extension of its work in Honduras that began in 1887. The Adventist Mission in British Honduras was officially organized in 1922. The two countries were separated administratively in 1930. By 1960, the Adventist community in Belize numbered 1,050; it grew to about 2,500 in 1970, and increased to about 12,000 in 1978. Adventist work was centered in the Districts of Belize and Corozal. In 2000, the Adventists reported 48 congregations and 10,700 members, which made this the largest Protestant denomination in Belize in terms of communicants. The 2000 census reported 12,160 Adventist adherents.

The Church of the Nazarene began work in Belize in the 1930s as an extension of their work in Guatemala, after two Mayan Indian lay-preachers walked more than sixty miles from their home in the Petén of Guatemala to Benque Viejo on the border to evangelize and start new churches in British Honduras. In 1931 the Mission Council of the Church of the Nazarene decided to enter Belize as a new field of service, and eventually sent two veteran, elderly, single female missionaries to work in Benque Viejo, located in Cayo District. By 1955, 11 Nazarene missionaries were serving in Belize, assisted by 22 national workers, who served ten organized churches with about 450 members and 300 children enrolled in six Nazarene schools. In 1966, there were 16 churches and 11 missions. During the 1960s work began among East Indians,

Garifuna, Kekchí and Mopan-Maya near Punta Gorda in the Toledo District. The Nazarene High School was established in 1964 in Benque Viejo and later was moved to Belize City. Also, the Nazarenes began a program of Theological Education by Extension (TEE) throughout Belize in several languages: English, Spanish, and various Amerindian dialects. In 2000, the Nazarenes reported 28 congregations with 1,820 members; the 2000 census reported 6,117 Nazarene adherents.

The Gospel Missionary Union (GMU), an independent Holiness mission that has been renamed Avant Ministries (Kansas City, MO), sent their first missionaries to Belize in 1955, the Gordon Lees, who established the Yarborough Bible Church in Belize City in 1956. The GMU acquired a 20-acre tract of land about 30 miles from Belize City in 1956, where they opened a camping-conference center and a Bible school, known as Carol Farm. Outreach began among the Yucatec-Maya in 1960 in Orange Walk district, and a Christian bookstore was established in Belize City in 1962. In 2000, the GMU reported 17 congregations with about 940 members.

Several Anabaptist-Mennonite groups began arriving in Belize in the late 1950s from northern Mexico, and by 1978 there were at least a dozen Mennonite agricultural colonies in the country, mainly composed of Old Colony Mennonites (Reinlanders), Kleingemeinde Mennonites ("The Little Brotherhood") and Sommerfelders who spoke Low German. After Hurricane Hattie devastated parts of Belize in 1961, a number of Mennonite agencies arrived to provide disaster relief, including the Beachy Amish and the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. In 1969, the Mennonite Central Committee established the Mennonite Center in Belize City to assist the Mennonite colonies both economically and socially.

By 1978, the Belize Evangelical Mennonite Church had been organized with five congregations and 122 communicant members among Creoles, Mestizos, Mayans and Garifuna. In addition, ten distinct Mennonite communities reported 37 organized congregations and about 1,900 communicant members. Overall, in 1978, the total Mennonite community in Belize numbered about 2,800, and most of them resided in agricultural colonies at Spanish Lookout, Blue Creek and Shipyard. In 1987, the total Mennonite membership was 2,236 in 37 congregations, with a total community of about 3,286 people. According to the 2000 census, the total Mennonite community in Belize numbered 9,497 adherents; however, the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* only reported 3,575 members in 40 congregations in 2003.

Other non-Pentecostal groups in Belize include The Salvation Army (1913), Christian Brethren (1949), National Presbyterian Church of Mexico (1958), independent Christian Churches / Churches of Christ (1969), Friends / Quakers (1975), Congregational Methodist Church (2002), Gospel Outreach Ministry International (1991), Mission to the World / Presbyterian Church in America (1996), the Methodist Protestant Church, and dozens of other small denominations and independent churches.

Although there were few Pentecostal churches in Belize in 1960 (the oldest are the Pentecostal Christian Assembly in Roaring Creek Village, founded in 1912; and City Mission International Pentecostal Church in Belize City, founded in 1938), since that time the Pentecostal movement has experienced substantial growth throughout the country. From five organized churches and about 200 members in 1960, the Pentecostals grew to 67 congregations and 1,656 baptized members in 1978. According to the 1980 census, Pentecostal adherents numbered 3,237 and represented 2.3 percent of the national population. According to the 2000 census, there were 17,189 Pentecostal adherents in Belize, which represented 7.4 percent of the national population.

In 1978, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the country was the Kekchí and Mayan Churches of Belize, founded in 1968, which reported 15 congregations and 750 members. The

Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) arrived in 1944 and by 1978 there were 22 churches and 610 members among Creoles and Mestizos.

The Assemblies of God of Jamaica (Evangel Temple in Kingston) sent the Rev. and Mrs. Malchus B. Bennett to Belize in September 1946 to begin missionary work among the Creoles. By 1949, several small congregations had been established in Belize City, Sand Hill, Stann Creek and Corozal. The arrival in 1951 of the Rev. and Mrs. Walter Clifford, who previously had served as missionaries in India and Ceylon for 20 years with the Assemblies of God (Springfield, Missouri), brought experience and encouragement to the work in Belize. Later in 1951, the Cliffords established a Bible Institute in Belize City to train Christian workers. The mother church in Belize City, Bethel Temple, opened a primary school in 1953 under the administration of the Cliffords.

In 1960, the Assemblies of God in Belize reported only three churches with a total of 90 baptized members. However, the work was hindered by internal controversies in 1955 with Malchus B. Bennett and in 1969 with Lloyd Wright that led to the formation of two rival groups with a combined membership in 1978 of only a few hundred members. These divisions led to demoralization and decline in the work of the Assemblies of God in Belize: some of the talented Belizean and Jamaican pastors went to the USA and others became separatists; the number of national workers declined from 11 in 1969 to four in 1971; and the number of adherents declined from 480 in 1969 to 149 in 1971.

In 1978, missionary Edward Fairbanks, affiliated with the Assemblies of God Division of Foreign Missions, reported six organized churches and 17 preaching points, with a total of only 96 baptized members. The Council of the Assemblies of God of Belize was reorganized in 1980, under missionary superintendent Alver Rance who coordinated church work in English and Spanish. In 1985, the Assemblies of God reported 41 churches and 16 preaching points, but with only about 1,000 members; in 1998, there were a total of 47 churches; and in 2001, there were 54 churches and 14 preaching points, served by 27 ordained pastors and 40 Christian workers.

In 2002, the Belize Assemblies of God established a camp and conference facility, Green Pastures Retreat Center, which has become a place of ethnic unity that depicts the uniqueness of its multicultural ministry in Belize. In 2003, this denomination reported 81 churches, missions and preaching points, comprised of English, Spanish, Chinese and Mayan believers.

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) traces its origin in Belize to 1953-1955, when Malchus B. Bennett left the Assemblies of God and became affiliated with the COGIC, an Afro-American denomination with headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee. However, after 25 years of labor, only five churches and two missions had been established by the COGIC, with 540 members, by 1978. The mother church in Belize City, Calvary Temple, operates a large primary school under the supervision of Bishop Bennett.

Other smaller Pentecostal denominations include the Pentecostal Church of God of America (1956), Church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith Church (1957), Elim Fellowship (1967), Shield of Faith International Mission (1983), Calvary Commission (1984), United Pentecostal Church International (1984), Full Gospel Grace Fellowship (1989), International Pentecostal Holiness Church (2000), Church of God of Prophecy, Resurrection Churches and Ministries, and Youth With A Mission (YWAM).

The Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC), previously known as The Protestant Council, was formed in the late '60s or early '70s with seven affiliated denominations. Despite many difficulties it survived, and in 1982 it was renamed the BAEC. It had over 30 members in November 2008 and was led by its president, the Rev. Eugene Crawford, who is affiliated with the Central Assembly of God in Belize City.

Many Christian groups are associated through the Belize Council of Churches (CCC), which in turn is related to the Caribbean Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches (WCC), or to the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC). The BCC was founded in 1978 as the Belize Christian Council; it was previously called the Belize Social Council, founded in 1957 with eight member institutions as an interfaith organization, which became the BCC in 1981.

Historically, the majority of Protestants in Belize have been Anglicans and Methodists, although most are non-communicants, which reflects an attitude of religious indifference or nominalism. However, the proportional decline of Anglican and Methodist adherents in the total population was offset by the growth of other Protestant denominations between 1970 and 2000, based on an analysis of the corresponding census data.

Overall, according to the 2000 census, the largest group of Protestant adherents was Pentecostal (7.4 percent of the national population) followed by Anglican (5.3 percent), Adventist (5.2 percent), Mennonite (4.1 percent), Baptist (3.5 percent), Methodist (3.5 percent) and Nazarene (2.6 percent); all other Protestants adherents were 4.2 percent.

### **Other Religions**

According to the 2000 census, “other religions” in Belize had a total of 10,677 adherents (4.6 percent of the national population), among which were the following non-Protestant Christian groups: Maronite Christians (Eastern-Rite believers who recognize the authority of the Pope in Rome) among the Lebanese; a Greek Orthodox Church in Santa Elena, Cayo District; and a significant presence of Jehovah’s Witnesses (42 churches, 1,561 members and 3,366 adherents in 2005) and of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon missionary work began in 1980), which reported 12 churches and 3,430 adherents in 2008. There are small communities of Christadelphians, Unity School of Christianity, and The Family (formerly known as the Children of God).

Non-Christian religions (2000 census data) include Hinduism (367 among East Indians); Islam (243 adherents, including Black Muslims); Garifuna religion; Myalism (the old tribal religion of the Ashanti adapted to the Caribbean context), Obeah (witchcraft), and Rastafarianism among the Creole population.

Traditionally, most of the Asian Indian immigrants were Hindus, although some were Muslims. Today, the Asian Indian heritage persons – whose ancestors arrived during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – live in villages scattered all over Belize; their ancestors intermarried with the local people and lost their language and original religions during subsequent generations. They live in reasonably compact rural communities and number between 10,000 and 15,000, which is more than 5% of the population of Belize. The newer Asian Indian Diaspora in Belize consists of “People of Indian Origin” (known as PIOs) who arrived in the country during the 1950s, when Belize was still a British colony. The PIOs maintain close and regular contact with India through frequent trips to visit friends and relatives in their homeland.

The Islamic community of Belize is estimated at 2,794 (2008) and represents about one percent of the total population; the community is led by the Islamic Mission of Belize (IMB), headquartered in Belize City. As the only recognized Islamic organization in Belize, the IMB's Islamic center has a prayer hall and a primary school.

There is a small Jewish community (less than 1,000) and a yet smaller Baha’i Faith community (205 adherents) that add to Belize’s pluralistic religious life.

Among practitioners of Amerindian religions and Popular Catholicism there are “specialists” who practice witchcraft (*brujería*), shamanism (*chamanismo*) and folk healing (*curanderismo*). Three of the Amerindian peoples in Central America that survived the ravages of colonization are the Kekchí, Mopán and Yucatán Maya in Belize, which today number around 25,000. Most Mayans are nominal Catholics who also maintain native animistic religious beliefs and practices. Most Garifuna today are marginal Christians (Catholics or Protestants) who still maintain their traditional cultural and religious beliefs and practices based on animism (see GARIFUNA RELIGION). “Popular religiosity” (syncretistic) is practiced by a majority of the Catholic Mestizo population.

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