

LATIN AMERICAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROGRAM -  
PROGRAMA LATINOAMERICANO DE ESTUDIOS SOCIORRELIGIOSOS  
(PROLADES)

**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN  
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:  
RELIGION IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS**

By Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES

Last revised on 22 January 2011

**PROLADES**

Apartado 1524-2050, San Pedro, Costa Rica  
Telephone (506) 2283-8300; FAX (506) 2234-7682

Internet: <http://www.prolades.com/>

E-Mail: [prolades@racsa.co.cr](mailto:prolades@racsa.co.cr)



# Religion in the U.S. Virgin Islands

## Country Overview

Named by Christopher Columbus in 1493, the Virgin Islands are famed for white sand beaches, crystal-blue waters and idyllic sailing venues. Steeped in maritime history, and the remnants of the Danish, Dutch, English, French and Spanish cultures, the Virgin Islands, located in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean Sea east of Puerto Rico, are one of the busiest cruise and vacations destinations in the Caribbean.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the archipelago was divided into two territorial units, one English and the other Danish. Sugarcane, produced by slave labor, drove the islands' economy during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1917, the U.S. Government purchased the Danish portion (formerly part of the Dutch West Indies), which had been in economic decline since the abolition of slavery in 1848.

The U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI, about 50 cays and islands, totaling 1,910 sq km: land 346 sq km; water 1,564 sq km), with a total population of 109,750, includes the large islands of Saint Croix (84 sq miles - 216 sq km), Saint John (20 sq miles - 52 sq km) and Saint Thomas (32 sq miles - 83 sq km). The land area is mostly hilly to rugged and mountainous with little level land. The highest point is Mt. Crown on Saint Thomas at 1,556 feet (474 meters).



Covered with red-roofed buildings and houses, the capital city of **Charlotte Amalie** (pop. 12,100) on St. Thomas – named after Charlotte Amalie of Hesse-Kassel (or Hessen-Cassel) (1650–1714), queen consort to King Christian V of Denmark – sits amidst lush green hills, and is widely considered the most beautiful port in the Caribbean. Charlotte Amalie (founded in 1691) has many buildings of historical importance and is home to the second-oldest Jewish synagogue in the Western Hemisphere. The duty-free shopping, hotels and restaurants on St. Thomas and St. Croix are second to none. Air and ferry service to all major islands is convenient and economical.

**Christiansted**, the largest of two main towns on St. Croix, was constructed in 1735 and served as the capital of the Danish West Indies from 1755 to 1871. Christiansted has maintained its Dutch architecture, and offers shopping, dining and sightseeing in a setting that blends historical significance with a modern flair. **Frederiksted**, established in 1752, is the second largest town on St. Croix. Known for its continuous shoreline, Frederiksted today serves as St. Croix's cruise ship dock. Frederiksted is also home to Fort Frederik, a restored 18<sup>th</sup> century fort where Governor Peter Von Scholten emancipated the slaves in 1848.

The USVI are an organized, unincorporated territory of the USA, with policy relations between the USVI and the U.S. Government under the jurisdiction of the Office of Insular Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior, in Washington, DC. Virgin Islanders are U.S. citizens.

The USVI legislative branch is a unicameral Senate with 15 seats, and members are elected by popular vote to serve two-year terms. The last election was held on 2 November 2010 with the following results: seats by party - Democratic Party 10, ICM 2, independent 3. The USVI elects one non-voting representative to the U.S. House of Representatives. The current Governor of the USVI is the Honorable John DeJongh (since 1 January 2007). Since 1970, the territorial governor has been elected every four years, whereas previously the governor was appointed by the U.S. President. The major political parties are the **Democratic Party**, led by Arturo Watlington; the **Independent Citizens' Movement** (ICM), led by Usie Richards; and the **Republican Party**, led by Gary Sprauve.

Although the official language is English, other languages are also spoken: English 74.7 percent; Spanish or Spanish Creole, 16.8 percent; French or French Creole, 6.6 percent; others 1.9 percent (2000 census). The ethnic composition in 2000 (census) was reported as: Black (Afro-American), 75.0 percent; White, 6.2 percent; other races, 10.3 percent (including Asian, 1.1 percent); and mixed race (including many Puerto Rican *mestizos*), 8.5 percent (2000 census). In addition, the category Hispanic/Latino of any race was 14.6 percent of the population.

The USVI's economy and culture are closely associated with the British Virgin Islands. Tourism is the primary economic activity of the USVI, accounting for 80 percent of GDP and employment. The USVI hosted 2.4 million visitors in 2008. The manufacturing sector consists of petroleum refining, rum distilling, textiles, electronics, pharmaceuticals and watch assembly. One of the world's largest petroleum refineries is located on Saint Croix. The agricultural sector is small, with most food being imported. International business and financial services are small but growing components of the economy. The islands are vulnerable to substantial damage from tropical storms, including hurricanes. The government is working to improve fiscal discipline, to support construction projects in the private sector, to expand tourist facilities, to reduce crime, and to protect the environment.

### **Current Status of Religion**

According to the online *World Factbook* (January 2011) and other sources, the religious affiliation of the population was reported as: Protestant, 61 percent (includes Baptist, 42 percent; Anglican/Episcopal, 17 percent; others, 3 percent); Roman Catholic, 34 percent; and other/none, 4 percent.

## Overview of Social, Economic and Political Development

The Virgin Islands were originally settled by the Ciboney, Carib and Arawak Amerindians. The islands were named by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1493 for Saint Ursula and her virgin followers. Over the next 200 years, the islands were held by many European powers, including Spain, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France and Denmark-Norway.

The Dutch West India Company established a trading post on Saint Thomas in 1657. The Danish conquered St. Thomas in 1666, and by 1672 had established control over the entire island through the Danish West India and Guinea Company. By 1679, at least 156 Europeans were reported living on St. Thomas, along with their African slaves. The land was divided into plantations and sugarcane production became the primary economic activity. Captain Kidd, Sir Francis Drake, Blackbeard and other legendary pirates of the West Indies used St. Thomas as their base for maritime raids in the Caribbean. Its harbor also became famous for its slave market.

In 1685, the *Brandenburgisch-Africanische Compagnie* of Brandenburg, which became the Kingdom of Prussia, established a colony on St. Thomas and took control of the slave trade there. For some time, the largest slave auctions in the world were held on St. Thomas, which was known for its fine natural harbor, known as "Taphus" for the drinking establishments located nearby. In 1691, the primary settlement there was renamed Charlotte Amalie in honor of the wife of Denmark's King Christian V. It was later declared a free port by Frederick V.

Some historians believe that nearly 250,000 slaves were sold on the auction blocks at Charlotte Amalie before being sent elsewhere, often to the British colonies in what is now the southern part of the USA. By 1792, Denmark announced that it planned to officially end the slave trade. However, it was not until 1848 that it did so. The British freed their slaves in 1834.

Danish control over Saint John occurred in 1694. In 1717, Danish planters arrived on St. John from St. Thomas to begin cultivating plantations. By 1733, an estimated 100 sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations were operating on St. John. That same year, the slaves rebelled against their colonial masters, taking control of the island for about six months and killing many Europeans. It took hundreds of French troops to quell the rebellion.

In December 1732, the first two of many Moravian Brethren missionaries came from Herrnhut in Saxony, in present-day Germany, to minister to the slave population on St. Thomas. Distrusted at first by the white slave masters, the Moravian missionaries lived among the slaves and soon won their confidence. A small Jewish community developed at Charlotte Amalie and established the historic synagogue *Beracha Veshalom Vegmiluth Hasidim*, now considered the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the USA.

The first Europeans to establish themselves on St. Croix were the Dutch and English with a small number of French Protestants. In 1625, both countries, Britain and the Netherlands, co-existed on the island. This mutually beneficial relationship of sharing St. Croix ended without question when the Dutch governor killed his English counterpart. The English retaliated and killed the Dutch governor. Many years of battles over possession of the island followed between the two powers.

Dutch and French settlers slowly retreated leaving the English in control of St. Croix. The colony grew under British rule. However, the Spanish authorities in nearby Puerto Rico became concerned about the British presence and launched a surprise attack on St. Croix that killed many settlers and forced the others to leave. The French heard of the overthrow of the British and took the opportunity to take over St. Croix from the Spanish in 1650. Philippe de Poincy, an official of the Knights of Malta, sent 160 of his best troops to capture St. Croix from the Spanish forces. He succeeded and then quickly sent some 300 planters from St. Kitts to establish settlements on St. Croix.

Seeking to establish a stronger hold on St. Croix, King Louis XIV decided that the French Crown should take control of the situation. In 1665, the French West India Company (FWIC) was formed and assumed control of St. Croix. However, the FWIC did not fair very well and lasted only seven years. The French King dissolved the FWIC, established Crown rule over St. Croix, and continued to claim ownership although France had basically abandoned the island. Most of the French settlers had left St. Croix by 1695.

In 1733, France sold St. Croix to the Danish West India Company, which divided the island into plantations, boosting the already flourishing slave trade. Under the leadership of Frederik Moth, a new town at Christiansted was established within the first year.

As a result of sugarcane production, the economies of St. Thomas and neighboring islands of St. John and St. Croix became highly dependent on African slave labor. The islands became royal Danish colonies in 1754, named the Danish-Westindian islands (Danish: *De dansk-vestindiske øer*). Sugarcane, produced by African slave labor, dominated the islands' economy during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, until the abolition of slavery by Governor Peter von Scholten in July 1848.

The price of sugar in the world market was stable for the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and St. Croix's plantation owners were doing well. In 1803, the population of the island was 30,000 of which 26,500 were slaves engaged in planting and processing sugar cane.

While the sugar trade had brought prosperity to the Virgin Island's free citizens, the great economic boom began to decline by the 1820s. The continued export of sugar was threatened by hurricanes, drought and North American competition. The introduction of the sugar beet caused the demand for cane sugar to drastically decline, which virtually bankrupted the plantation owners. Cuba eventually took over the cane sugar market in the Caribbean.

The July 1848 slave rebellion on St. Croix, where some 5,000 blacks were free while another 17,000 remained enslaved, motivated Governor Peter von Scholten to abolish slavery. The resulting rise in labor costs further weakened the position of sugar producers. For the remainder of the Danish colonial period, the Virgin Islands were not economically viable and significant transfers of funds were made from the Danish state budgets to the authorities in the islands.

However, the harbors and fortifications on St. Thomas still retained a strategic importance, which prompted the U.S. Government in the 1860s to consider buying the island and its neighbors from Denmark for \$7.5 million, but this bid failed to have domestic legislative support. In 1867, a treaty to sell St. Thomas and St. John to the U.S. Government for \$7.5 million was agreed, but

the sale was never completed. A number of reforms aimed at reviving the islands' economy were attempted, but none had great success. By 1872, the British had so little interest in the British Virgin Islands that they placed them in the loosely conceived and administered Federation of the Leeward Islands. A second draft treaty to sell the islands to the USA was negotiated in 1902, but was narrowly defeated in the Danish Parliament.

The onset of World War I brought the reforms to a close and again left the islands isolated and exposed. During the submarine warfare phases of the First World War, the U.S. Government, fearing that the islands might be seized by Germany as a submarine base, again approached Denmark with a view to buying them. After a few months of negotiations, a selling price of \$25 million (equivalent to \$428,000,000 in 2010 dollars) was agreed. At the same time, the economics of continued possession weighed heavily on the minds of Danish decision-makers, and a bipartisan consensus in favor of selling emerged in the Danish Parliament.

A subsequent referendum, held in late 1916, confirmed the decision to sell by a wide margin. The deal was finally finalized on 17 January 1917, when the USA and Denmark exchanged their respective treaty ratifications. The U.S. Government took possession of the islands on 31 March 1917 and the territory was renamed the Virgin Islands of the United States. U.S. citizenship was granted to the inhabitants of the islands in 1927.

Water Island, a small island to the south of Saint Thomas, was initially administered by the U.S. federal government and did not become a part of the U.S. Virgin Islands territory until 1996, when 50 acres (20 ha) of land was transferred to the territorial government. The remaining 200 acres (81 ha) of the island were purchased from the U.S. Department of the Interior in May 2005 for \$10, a transaction that marked the official change in jurisdiction.

The U.S. Virgin Islands are administratively divided into three districts, which include a total of 20 sub-districts. The three districts are: St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix.

## **Overview of Religious Development**

### **OLDER LITURGICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES**

***The Roman Catholic Church*** (34 percent or about 37,400 adherents). Although many Roman Catholics in the USVI are Hispanic immigrants and their descendants from other Caribbean islands, mainly Puerto Rico, the fact that “Hispanics/Latinos of any race” represented only 14.6 percent of the population in 2000 means that more than half of the Catholic adherents are from other population segments, such as those of French-heritage.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Saint Thomas was erected as the Territorial Prelature of the Virgin Islands on 30 April 1960. Its name was changed and was elevated to a Diocese on 20 April 1977. It is the only suffragan see of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. The Diocese is governed from Charlotte Amalie on the island of Saint Thomas by a bishop whose episcopal seat is the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. The current Bishop of Saint Thomas is the Rev. Herbert A. Bevard, who was appointed in July 2008.

In 1980, the Diocese of Saint Thomas reported six parishes with one religious priest and eight diocesan priests who were assisted by 15 religious brothers and 18 religious sisters (nuns). As of 2004, the Diocese had eight parishes with 12 religious priests and five diocesan priests who were assisted by 30 permanent deacons, 14 religious brothers and 18 religious sisters (nuns).

Charismatic prayer meetings are held on Monday night at Holy Family Catholic Church on St. Thomas, on Tuesday night at St. Ann Catholic Church on St. Croix, and on Thursday night at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church on St. John.

***The Danish Lutheran Church.*** Several Lutheran Churches and social service agencies were founded in the Danish Virgin Islands – the Lutheran Church was the state religion of Denmark – prior to 1917 when the islands were sold to the U.S. Government. The Danish Lutherans founded, in 1904, the West Indian Committee for Child Care and sent two deaconesses to St. Croix to help combat the high infant mortality rate on the island. By 1917, there were three facilities: Queen Louise Home for Children in both Frederiksted and Christiansted, and the Ebenezer Orphanage for Girls in Frederiksted. Consequently, in 1917, these churches and agencies were transferred to the administration of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), which continues to administer those churches and institutions, the latter under Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands. Danish, Creole and later English languages were used in the worship of the congregations. Creole was used as late as the 1840s and the last Danish services, held at Christmas only, were discontinued in the 1930s. In 1988, the Lutheran Church in America merged with the American Lutheran Church and the Association of American Lutheran Churches to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with headquarters in Chicago, IL.

***Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)***, Virgin Islands Conference, part of the ELCA Caribbean Synod, which includes Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands (six churches): Reformation Lutheran Church, St. Thomas; Frederick Lutheran Church (founded in 1666), Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas; Nazareth Lutheran Church, St. John; Christus Victor Lutheran Church, La Vallee, St. Croix.; Lord God of Sabaoth Lutheran Church (1753), Christiansted, St. Croix; and Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (1766), Frederiksted, St. Croix.

During the 1780s, the Frederiksted Lutheran Church had two congregations, the Danish Congregation and the Mission Congregation. They used the same building and were served by the same pastor. It was listed as part of the Christiansted parish and was served by Christiansted pastors until 1859 when it had its own pastor.

Forty members of the Royal Danish Mission Congregation gathered at "Fredensberg" (peaceful hill) on December 1, 1788 to record the names of all the people in the Mission Congregation. Members were listed as being either Negro, or Mulatto, free or slave (owner listed). During that period, there was no missionary assigned to the West End, and the minister from Christiansted came infrequently. However, the Mission Congregation met regularly. The services were led by Michael Samuelsen, himself a slave and clerk of the church.

The shortage of Lutheran pastors was a constant problem in the colonies. Illness, brought about by the climate, forced many Danes and other Europeans, including pastors to return home. Early records show that the mortality rate in the islands during the eighteenth century was very high. More often than not, both the Christiansted and Frederiksted congregations were left to administer for



themselves throughout the years. Unlike the Anglicans and Moravians, Lutherans were unable to transfer clergy from other Caribbean islands; there were few Lutherans in the region and no other Danish-speaking Lutherans. During one thirteen year period, 1830-1845, there was only one Lutheran pastor for the three islands, serving the four Danish congregations and the four mission congregations.

Source: <http://www.dkconsulateusvi.com/HDC/stCroix/trinity/trinity.html>

***The Dutch Reformed Church.*** The first congregation established in the Virgin Islands was the *St. Thomas Reformed Church*, built in 1660, after the Dutch West India Company established a trading post on Saint Thomas in 1657. Another Dutch Reformed Church was established at Christiansted – *The St. Croix Reformed Church* – on St. Croix prior to 1740. After the hurricanes of 1825 and 1827 seriously damaged the *Lutheran Church of the Zebaoth* (built in 1753) in Christiansted, the congregation began to hold worship services temporarily at St. John’s Anglican Church in 1831. At that time, officials of the Dutch Reformed Church, who were leaving St. Croix, offered to sell their church building to the Lutherans. After purchasing the church property, the rehabilitation of the church building lasted from 1831 until 1834 under the direction of Governor General Peter von Scholten. The first service was held on 25 July 1834 in the newly-constructed *Lord God of Sabaoth Lutheran Church*.

***The Episcopal Diocese of the Virgin Islands - U.S. Episcopal Church*** (17 percent or about 18,700 adherents), 14 churches and missions; headquarters on St. Thomas.

When the U.S. Government purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917, the islands had three Anglican parishes and one mission church, all part of the Diocese of Antigua. Those churches were St. John’s, St. Paul’s and Holy Cross mission on St. Croix; and All Saints on St. Thomas. St. John’s Anglican Church was build prior to 1831 in Christiansted, St. Croix.

At that time, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church appointed the Bishop of Puerto Rico as Bishop-in-Charge of the new District. Its inauguration was celebrated in 1949 at St. John’s on St. Croix, the oldest parish.

In 1962, the House of Bishops appointed The Right Rev. Cedric Mills to serve as Bishop of the Virgin Islands. He took up residence in 1963, just in time to preside over the unification of all Anglican/American parishes in the British and U.S. Virgin Islands. St. Thomas was the central location, so it was selected as the site of the Bishop’s residence and the diocese office.

The Bishop of Puerto Rico had previously invited the Anglicans in the British Virgin Islands to join with the Episcopalians in the U.S. Virgin Islands to form the Diocese of the Virgin Islands, which is part of Province II of the Episcopal Church. This affiliation across political borders was a formal repetition of earlier close relationships that had existed when both territories were part of the Diocese of Antigua in previous centuries.

#### **PIETIST-HOLINESS DENOMINATIONS**

***The Moravian Church*** (1732). From its first mission on St. Thomas in 1732, the German Moravian Brethren established missions on many other Caribbean islands to evangelize the African

slaves and freedmen, despite strong opposition from white plantation owners and colonial authorities: St. Croix, Virgin Islands, in 1734; St. John, Virgin Islands, in 1741; Antigua in 1756; Barbados in 1765; St. Kitts in 1777; and Tobago in 1790. Today, the following Moravian churches exist in the U.S. Virgin Islands: New Herrnhut (1737), Bethany (1741), Friedensthal (1755), Nisky (1771), Friedensberg (1771), Emmaus (1782), Friedensfeld (1801) and Memorial (1843).

***The Methodist Church in the Caribbean & the Americas*** (MCCA), organized in 1967 with its headquarters in Antigua, is an autonomous conference in the tradition of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Great Britain, which became a separate entity from the Church of England about 1791. *The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, formally constituted in 1818 and based in London, became the principal means of spreading Methodism throughout the British West Indies during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The MCCA currently has eight Districts: the Bahamas/Turks and Caicos Islands, Belize/ Honduras, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Leeward Islands, Panama/Costa Rica and South Caribbean. The Leeward Islands District includes the nations and territories of Anguilla, Antigua & Barbuda, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Monsterrat, St. Christopher & Nevis, Netherlands Antilles, U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Maarten/St. Martin, and Guadeloupe. There are two circuits in the U.S. Virgin Islands: St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John, with a total of six churches and six ordained ministers.

The early history of Wesleyan Methodist missions in the Virgin Islands is recounted as follows by George and Mary Grace Findlay in *Wesley's World Parish* (1913: 55):

St. Thomas (Danish) was early visited from Tortola [by Dr. Thomas Coke and other Methodist missionaries during 1788-1789]. Although no missionary was allowed to settle, through fear of British influence, a small Society was formed, which for long was held together by two coloured women-leaders.

***The United Methodist Church*** represents the Wesleyan Methodist tradition in the USA. After the American Revolutionary War (1776-1783), John Wesley acknowledged the need to establish an autonomous jurisdiction in the newly-established United States of America. In 1784, Wesley sent the Rev. Dr. Thomas Coke from England to North America to form an independent American Methodist Church under Francis Asbury (born in England), who became one of the first two bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the forerunner of the United Methodist Church (organized in 1968 as a merger between numerous Methodist denominations).

Community United Methodist Church and Center was first established in October 1953 in Frederiksted, St. Croix, by the Board of Global Ministries Home and Mission Program of the United Methodist Church. The center was first established to serve the Hispanic community on the island of St. Croix. The Community United Center currently serves the multi-cultural community of St. Croix by providing a daycare center, an early childhood education program, an after school program, and conducts community outreach programs.

Currently, this congregation is being led by Rev. Gilbert Laban of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA), St. Croix Circuit of the Leeward Islands District.

***African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME).*** The AME's Sixteenth Episcopal District has its headquarters in Kingston, Jamaica, and composed of seven Annual Conferences: European Conference, Dominican Republic Conference, Guyana Conference, Haiti Conference, Jamaica Conference, *Virgin Islands Conference*, and the Windward Islands Conference. The Virgin Island District reports three churches/missions under the supervision of the Presiding Elder, the Rev. Uklyn Hendricks, on St. Croix, including *Bethel AME Church* in Christiansted and *St. Luke AME Church* in Fredriksted.

***African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ).*** The AMEZ' Eastern North Carolina Episcopal District is headquartered in Raleigh, NC, and is composed of the following Annual Conferences: Central North Carolina; Cape Fear, North Carolina; Albemarle, South Africa; Zimbabwe; and the U.S. Virgin Islands (St. Croix). Local churches in the USVI include *Beulah AMEZ Church* in Christiansted and *Medford AMEZ Church* on St. Croix.

The West Indies Sugar Factory, also known as the Bethlehem Sugar Factory, built a little village next to the factory where the cane cutters, railroad and factory workers lived. The workers at the factory had to go a distance to either the town of Christiansted or Frederiksted to worship. In those days, in their Sunday best, they either walked or rode in a donkey cart into town.

The workers very much wanted a church near the factory. Even though there was great resistance to any Methodist movement in the Danish West Indies prior to 1917 – the only official denominations authorized to practice at the time were Anglican, Moravian, Roman Catholic and Lutheran – it is believed that a Rev. Thomas Aagaard, a Methodist missionary, began holding worship services in the rear of his dry goods store in Bethlehem Village.

The first Beulah AME Zion Church (Hurricane Hugo destroyed the original church building in September 1989) was constructed between 1925 and 1926. The only thing salvaged was the church bell that now sits in front of the present church building, which was rebuilt with the addition of classrooms and dedicated on 15 September 1991. The cornerstone located in the front of the belfry of the original church building had the marking "AMEZ 1926." The land upon which the Beulah Church was first erected and now stands was a gift from Mr. Jacob Lachmann, the principle owner of the West Indian Sugar Factory.

(source: [http://www.geocaching.com/seek/cache\\_details.aspx?guid=a50505f3-8622-4408-9ca0-6b06f3ab3b59](http://www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=a50505f3-8622-4408-9ca0-6b06f3ab3b59))

***Pilgrim Holiness/Wesleyan Holiness Church*** (1905). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the only denominations in these islands were the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Moravian and Methodist churches. In this historic context, the arrival on St. Croix of the Rev. Gibson, a Pilgrim Holiness Church missionary from the USA, caused quite a commotion. His preaching was unpopular to the masses; he was mocked and treated with excessive hostility; and, on one occasion, he was beaten in public. However, those who dared to stand in public and listen, and who confessed faith in Christ as a result of his preaching, assembled in rented quarters as a new community of believers at Christiansted.

In 1906, the **Christiansted Pilgrim Holiness Church** was erected and dedicated, and about two years later a congregation in the town of Frederiksted was started. Sometime during the 1920s, Rev. Gibson left the island and the Rev. Stanley Mayhew took his place as pastor of the two

churches on St. Croix. Mayhew entered the ministry as a young man and served the church faithfully and competently for many years. He has been referred to as one of the more successful pastors of the Holiness work on St. Croix.

In the meantime, on the island of St. Thomas, the Rev. Fitzroy Joseph and his wife Leotta were getting the work started. That church prospered for a while, but sometime in the 1930s, it was turned over to another denomination. However, at that time, the **Christian Mission**, a denomination with a similar Wesleyan-Armenian emphasis, was established and growing. Christian Mission pastors such as William R. Squires, Leon F. Hoyte, and James N. Rollock served that congregation faithfully during some trying times and difficult situations. In 1948, the Rev. Gladstone A. Lynton arrived on St. Thomas to fill the vacancy caused by the departure of Rollock.

In 1951, as the result of a profitable dialog between the Rev. Lynton of the Christian Mission and the Rev. L. L. Miller of the Pilgrim Holiness Church, a merger was effected. The St. Thomas Christian Mission then became the **St. Thomas Pilgrim Holiness Church**. In 1960, the Rev. Lynton, as a Pilgrim Holiness pastor, was transferred to the island of Nevis and was replaced by the Rev. R. Alister Charles.

On the island of St. Croix, the Rev. Stanley Mayhew was succeeded by his brother, the Rev. John Mayhew. The church continued to grow under the ministries of numerous missionaries, such as E. E. Phillippee, L. Sturt, T. M. Weir, G. R. Gilmore and L. C. Hiles. The Rev. Dean Phillips was the last missionary to serve as pastor of the Pilgrim Holiness Church on St. Croix. About 1950, the Rev. Charles E. Lynch became the pastor of the St. Croix churches, and in 1952 the radio broadcast of the Rev. Charles E. Fuller's "The Old Fashioned Gospel Hour" (from Long Beach, CA) went on the air for the first time. By means of that ministry, the Pilgrim Holiness Church in the Virgin Islands began reaching out with the gospel message to other islands. A few years later, the Pilgrim Holiness Church on St. Thomas began to broadcast the gospel message by means of "Pilgrim Voice" on local radio station WSTX, with the Rev. Gladstone Lynton as the speaker.

In a move toward district unity, the Rev. Charles E. Lynch was appointed superintendent over the area. He pastored the Christiansted church, supervised the church in Frederiksted, and made occasional visits to the church on St. Thomas. Regular visits by the Rev. E. E. Phillippee, field superintendent, served the useful purpose of keeping the Virgin Islands Pilgrim Holiness Church members informed and encouraged. On St. Thomas the membership grew rapidly as many Pilgrim Holiness people from other islands in the Eastern Caribbean migrated to the Virgin Islands in search of employment. By that time, some officers of the General Church were including the Virgin Islands in their Caribbean itinerary.

In 1961, the General Superintendent, Rev. Dr. Melvin Snyder, visited the church on St. Thomas. He was on his way to serve as chairman of the Caribbean Field Conference in Barbados. A year later initial efforts were made towards district organization and an Advisory Council was appointed. In 1964, the Rev. Charles Lynch's deteriorating health made his resignation from pastoral duties a necessity. He was followed in the superintendence of the churches and the pastorate of the Christiansted Pilgrim Holiness Church by the Rev. Ira M. Taylor.

On St. Thomas the ministry of Rev. R. Alister Charles was bearing much fruit. Church attendance and the outreach ministries were sources of inspiration to the parishioners. The radio program that had begun as a fifteen minute broadcast on the local station was moved to a missionary radio station, WIVV, and extended to a thirty-minute ministry. In 1967, the Rev. Charles was replaced by the Rev. James P. Campau of Lansing, Michigan. He arrived on the scene at the time when the membership had outgrown the building in which it had worshipped for more than forty years. That church began a building program on a half-acre of land in Contant Valley, about one mile from the heart of downtown Charlotte Amalie where the old building was located. The new church building was dedicated in 1970.

As a result of the 1968 merger of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America and the Pilgrim Holiness Church, the name of the denomination in the West Indies became The Wesleyan Holiness Church. In 1969, the Rev. Ira M. Taylor, pastor of the Christiansted Church, accepted the call to pastor the Oakwood Wesleyan Church in Toronto, Canada, and in his place the Rev. Campau was appointed as superintendent, while the Rev. Wingrove Lynton became pastor of the Christiansted Church and served there for 32 years.

**In 1970, there were three local churches in the USVI: First Wesleyan on St. Thomas, and the Christiansted and Frederiksted churches on St. Croix.** The Beeston Hill church, dedicated in 1975, is the daughter church of the Christiansted Church, now known as **Trinity Wesleyan Holiness Church.** **Faith Wesleyan Holiness Church** on St. Thomas is the daughter church of First Wesleyan. It was founded in 1982 when about 25 members of First Wesleyan, who lived in the East End of that island and decided to plant a church in that area.

The church in Frederiksted had few resident pastors. It was customary to have one minister on St. Croix who resided in Christiansted and served that church as pastor while, at the same time, giving general supervision to the church in Frederiksted. However, the Frederiksted church did have a resident pastor for many years, in the person of the Rev. Fitzroy Joseph who resided there and pastored until his death in 1949. Others persons who served as pastor were Brother De-Grasse, Sister Lila Oliver, the Rev. Rodwell Buckley and the Rev. Charles Groves. In 1969, the Rev. and Mrs. Herbert Spence arrived on St. Croix to serve the Frederiksted church. After they retired in 2001, they were succeeded by the Rev. Donald Bernard who previously served the church on Tortola.

**The Midland church** is the daughter of the Frederiksted church. In 1980, the Frederiksted church had outgrown its facilities and 31 members were released to start the new work, situated about eight miles away. The pastors of this new church were the Rev. Laretta Spence and the Rev. Edward Halcott. The Rev. Alsender E. Williams, the current pastor, arrived in August 1991. Today, there are a total of six Wesleyan Holiness churches in the USVI with about 400-500 members.

**The Church of the Nazarene** (1943). An independent church was established in the capital city of Christiansted, St. Croix, in 1932. This congregation never really flourished. In 1943, the independent pastor turned over the work to the Church of the Nazarene, which sent the Rev. and Mrs. Lyle Prescott to pastor this struggling church. Within a year Prescott saw his membership doubled. However, Prescott had other leadership obligations in Puerto Rico as well. This dual

responsibility caused enough tension that the Prescotts turned over the work on St. Croix to the Pilgrim Holiness Mission and moved on to begin a new work in Cuba.

Twelve years later the Prescotts were transferred to Puerto Rico. Being so close geographically, Prescott paid a visit to his friends on St. Croix, who received him warmly. In 1961, the Church of the Nazarene again decided to open the work in the USVI. In August 1961, the Prescotts moved back from Puerto Rico to St. Croix. The first service was held in the house of a local woman in Christiansted. Later that year, another church was started across the island in the town of Frederiksted, beginning in March 1962. In October of that year, the church purchased an affordable one-acre property, where the church grew and prospered during the next several years until 1970 when the Rev. Prescott was tragically drowned in a fishing accident.

In June 1970, the Rev. and Mrs. Bustle became pastors of this work, which continued to grow until 1974 when the Bustles were asked to relocate in the Dominican Republic. Since then, there have been no resident Nazarene missionaries in the USVI. St. Croix became apart of the Leeward/Virgin Island District of the Church of the Nazarene in 1978 with three churches: two in Christiansted and one in Fredriksted on St. Croix.

***The Salvation Army***: there are two churches at Market Square, Lower Main Street, St. Thomas; and Fredericksted, St. Croix. The Church of God (Holiness), with headquarters in Overland Park, KS, also reports mission work in the USVI.

#### **ALL BAPTISTS DENOMINATIONS** (42 percent or about 46,200 adherents).

***Southern Baptist churches***: 16 affiliated congregations on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John, including Calvary Baptist Church on St. John, which are part of the Convention of Southern Baptists of Puerto Rico/Virgin Islands. The presence of the North American Mission Board and the cooperation of several mainland Southern Baptist churches and individuals who visit the islands to participate in VBS, short-term camps, open-air evangelism, and building repairs have produced positive results. Training has been given in evangelism and Sunday school growth and leadership with an emphasis on new church planting, especially among the Spanish-speaking islanders.

***Baptist International Missions International (Nashville, TN)***: Dr. Ray Thompson, Vice President and Executive Director of BIMI, organized *Calvary Baptist Church* on St. Thomas in 1956 before joining BIMI in 1964. On St. Croix, Clyde Simpson founded *Altona Baptist Church*. The need to train national leadership motivated these men, along with others, to establish Bluewater Bible College (BBC), which has trained over 150 graduates for full-time Christian ministries. Through the years there has been an ongoing staff of BIMI missionaries there. Dr. Dennis Bellew served as president and professor for many years. Missionaries Ken Guths and Audley Charltons teach at BBC. Heath Charles, a graduate of BBC and Tennessee Temple University and Seminary, is a professor and acting president of BBC, which has survived two major hurricanes that destroyed buildings and property during the past decade.

***National Baptist Convention of America*** (an Afro-American denomination founded in 1895 in Atlanta, GA): reports mission work in the USVI.

**National Association of Free Will Baptists:** Free Will Baptist Church and School in Sunny Isle, Christiansted, St. Croix.

**Missionary Baptist Churches:** Bethel Missionary Baptist Church on St. Thomas; Frederiksted Baptist Church on St. Croix.

**Independent Baptist churches** (denomination unknown): Emmanuel Baptist Church and Grace Baptist Church on St. Thomas; Calvary Baptist Church in Kingshill, St. Croix; First Sovereign Grace Baptist Mission at Fredriksted, St. Croix; Grace Baptist Central Church, Mt. Pleasant, Frederiksted, St. Croix; Island Baptist Church, St. Croix; Community Baptist Church, St. Croix; Muckle Memorial Baptist Church, St. Croix; Southgate Baptist Church, St. Croix; Way of the Cross Baptiste Church, St. Croix; and Bovoni Baptist Church, St. Thomas.

**The Virgin Islands Baptist School of Theology** is sponsored by Cruz Bay Baptist Church (formerly pastored by Emmanuel Jaggernaut who died in January 2009), Cruz Bay, St. John. Its denominational affiliation is unknown.

#### PENTECOSTAL DENOMINATIONS

**Assemblies of God:** First Assembly of God Church, Fisher Street, Christiansted, St. Croix; Assembly of God, Fredriksted, St. Croix; Assembly of God, St. Thomas.

**Church of God in Christ** (headquarters in Memphis, TN): reports mission work in the USVI.

**The Church of God (Cleveland, TN) – New Testament Church of God** began in 1989 when Pastor George Best arrived in St. Thomas, after serving as pastor in Tortuga, BVI, for 19 years.

**Church of God of Prophecy (COGP):** the COGP Regional Tabernacle is located at C-5 Estate Hoffman and Donoe Crossroad, St. Thomas. Bishop Amos W. Carty, Sr., who served in the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean for more than 40 years, relocating from St. Thomas to Albany, NY, in September 2005. The COGP territory of U.S. & British Virgin Islands and the ABC Islands (Netherlands Antilles) is under the supervision of Bishop Whitbourne Hutchinson.

**United Pentecostal Church (UPC):** the Rev. Stephen A. Shirley (resides in the Dominican Republic) is the Area Coordinator for the USVI and the BVI, although no UPC missionaries are currently listed as serving in the USVI.

**Other Pentecostals:** Apostolic Faith Church, Assembly of Christian Churches (Asamblea de Iglesias Cristianas – Puerto Rico), Church of God (World Headquarters, Huntsville, AL), Damascus Christian Church (Iglesia Cristiana Damasco – Puerto Rico), House of Refuge Deliverance Center, Life and Light Apostolic Center, Lighthouse Revival Center, Miracle Revival Church, The Church of God, Inc. (La Iglesia de Dios – Puerto Rico), Paradise Worship Center, Pentecostal Church of God (Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal – Puerto Rico), and Word of Faith International Christian Center.

## ADVENTIST DENOMINATIONS

**The Seventh-day Adventist Church** in the USVI is part of the North Caribbean Conference, with headquarters in Christiansted, St. Croix, which reported 68 churches and 24,223 church members in 2008.

**The Church of God (7<sup>th</sup> Day):** two churches, at Christiansted, St. Croix; and Smith Bay, St. Thomas. *The Church of God (Jerusalem)*, founded by Elder A. N. Dugger (b.1886-d.1975), is related historically to the Church of God (Seventh Day), which split into two factions in 1933: the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Stanberry, MO (later moved to Denver, CO) and the Church of God (7<sup>th</sup> Day) in Salem, WV. Elder Dugger was affiliated with the Salem, WV, and moved to Israel in 1953 to establish its world headquarters and publish the *Mount Zion Reporter*. Many of the churches affiliated with this movement use the name “Mt. Zion Church of God (7<sup>th</sup> Day).” This denomination (headquarters in Jerusalem, Israel) reports affiliated churches in the USA, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean (USVI, Antigua, Dominica, French Guiana, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Martin, Trinidad-Tobago, St. Vincent), Central and South America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, England and India. Source: <http://www.cog7day.org/>

## OTHER PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS AND INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

Church of the Apostles Doctrine (St. John), Calvary Church (St. John), independent Christian churches & churches of Christ, Christian Church-Disciples of Christ, Covenant Christian Center, Faith Christian Fellowship Church, Full Body Evangelistic Church, Global Life Church, Grace Gospel Chapel, Alpha Omega Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Iglesia Hermanos Unidos en Cristo Alpha Omega), International Gospel Center, KingdomLife International Christian Center, Living World Family Ministries, New Vision Ministries of St. Thomas, St. Thomas Reformed Church, United Christian International Assembly, Word of Life Ministries, Kingdom Power and Prayer Ministries.

**OTHER RELIGIONS:** other/none, seven percent.

**Eastern Orthodox traditions:** *St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church*, St. Thomas, which is affiliated with the **Archdiocese of the Coptic Orthodox Church**; and the *Kidus Selassie Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, St. Croix, which is affiliated with His Eminence Abune Yesehaq, Archbishop of the **Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in the Western Hemisphere and Southern Africa**.

**Marginal Christian groups:** **Jehovah's Witnesses – Watchtower Bible and Tract Society**; **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** (Mormons); the **Unitarian Universalists** on St. John and St. Croix; **Overcoming Saints of God** (Gainesville, FL), and **Qahal Yahweh** (Assemblies of Yahweh – Sacred Name Movement, a schismatic movement that began among Seventh-day Church of God members during the 1930s in the USA; it advocates concepts that are at variance with Christianity based its hermeneutical position toward the dominance of the Old Testament in biblical interpretation).

**Judaism.** In 1733, the French Government sold **St. Croix** to the Danish West India & Guinea Company for approximately \$150,000. Shortly after this transaction, the Danes made a clever



move by allowing immigrants of other nationalities to move in. The result was rapid development as everyone from the **Spanish Sephardic Jews** to the Huguenots purchased the available plantations. By 1777, there was a large number of Jews on St. Croix. It was under Danish rule that the sugar plantations flourished.

Denmark had control of a few islands in the Caribbean, such as **St. Thomas and St. Croix**. By the late 1700s, there was a Jewish congregation, *Berakah We-Shalom U-Gemilut Hasadim*, in the Danish Virgin Islands, and record books exist for births (dated 1786) and deaths (dated 1792). Most of the records were sent to the Royal Archives in Denmark or to the U.S. National Archives in Washington, DC. In considering the history of Jews in the Caribbean, it is important to know that there were Danish colonies with Jewish settlements.

Although there is evidence that Jews lived in the Virgin Islands during the 1770s, the island of St. Thomas got its first group of Jewish settlers during the American Revolution in 1781. The British Navy stationed a blockade along the Atlantic Coast hoping to starve the Revolutionaries. However, the nearby Dutch on the Caribbean island of St. Eustatius had little love for the British and much sympathy for the American Revolutionaries. They were happy to run the blockade for the Americans bringing arms and ammunitions desperately needed for the American war effort. The British Admiral Rodney declared "had it not been for that nest of vipers... this infamous island, the American rebellion could not possibly have subsisted..." In an effort to change the course of events, he went in and bombarded the island. The Jewish merchants fled from Admiral Rodney's rage, with many settling on St. Thomas. The small settlement had a tradition of social and religious tolerance and happily welcomed the new Jewish settlers.

The Saint Thomas Synagogue (*Beracha Veshalom Vegmiluth Hasidim*), built in 1833, is the second-oldest synagogue (building) and longest in continuous use now under the U.S. flag. The synagogue, fourth on this site, was built originally to house a congregation founded in 1796 by Sephardic Jews who had come to the Caribbean Basin to finance trade between Europe and the New World. The congregation reached its zenith in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, declined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with the fortunes of the Danish Virgin Islands, and grew again in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1837, Jews accounted for half the white population on St. Thomas, or about 400 people. The Jewish settlement included Spanish and Portuguese Jews who came as ship owners, planters of sugarcane and producers of rum and molasses. They arrived from Recife (Brazil), Suriname, Barbados, Holland and France. The English soon dominated the population and English became the language spoken on the streets. With the opening of the Panama Canal in August 1914, the Jewish population in the Virgin Islands diminished and most of the islands' Jews emigrated to Panama. By 1942, the Jewish population numbered no more than 50. By the 1980s, the Jewish population was increasing due to an influx of Jews from the North American mainland.

August 1995 and continuing through June 1996, the *Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas* in Charlotte Amalie celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding in 1796. The Bicentennial Celebration captured the attention of the world Jewry, making St. Thomas an international focal point. It was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1997. The congregation is affiliated with the Reform Jewish movement and the rabbi is a graduate of Hebrew Union College. In addition

to this congregation, another exists in the Elysian Beach Resort on St. Thomas, the *Chabad Lubavitch of the Virgin Islands*.

**Freemasonry.** In 1756, the Grand Lodge of England founded a lodge on St. Croix, called “St. Georges’ Lodge.” It was registered as No.224 in the Grand Lodge Register but was changed to No. 216 about ten years later. In 1776, Christian Ewald on behalf of the brethren on St. Croix made an appearance through his mother Lodge, “Zorabel To The North Star” in Copenhagen, to found a Daughter Lodge named “To The Holy Cross.” Ewald was named as the Master and had to declare under oath that he would fulfil his obligations, particularly to the Scottish Grand Lodge in Copenhagen. The work was most likely done in German, as was the custom at that time in Denmark. The founding of “To The Holy Cross Lodge” had a devastating effect on the English “St. Georges’ Lodge” because, on 29 April 1780, King Christian VII signed a prescript to the leaders of Freemasons, directing them that never and nowhere in any Danish land or possession should they recognize a foreign Prince of Royal Blood as Grand Master, or give any such authority or influence over the Order. This prescript was enlarged in another Royal document of 2 November 1792.

On 3 December 1785, another Danish Lodge “St. Thomas To Unity” was founded on the island of St. Thomas. The founding of this lodge, the departure of Bro. Ewald to Denmark and the loss of St. Thomas members, who joined the new lodge, caused “To The Holy Cross” Lodge to gradually decline and cease to function in 1787. The “St. Thomas To Unity Lodge” also ceased to function in 1810 because of lack of interest. It was revived in 1823 but ceased to function in 1835. In 1795, an English Lodge was founded on St. Thomas but ceased to exist in 1805.

Sometime during the 1850s, the Grand Orient Lodge of France issued a charter to “Les Coeurs Sinceres” Lodge on St. Thomas, but it ceased to function in the 1890s.

On 2 August 1871, the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of England issued a Charter to the Companions living on St. Thomas in the name of “Zetland Chapter No.356.” However, the Zetland Chapter ceased to function in 1900.

In 1877, another Lodge “Eureka 605” was founded in Christiansted, St. Croix, under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. However, “Eureka 605” Lodge ceased to function in 1900.

The Masons living on St. Thomas at the time of the union of the two Grand Lodges in England were a mixture of native and foreign-born. They were Jews, Gentiles, merchants, shopkeepers, clerks, seamen, civil servants and planters. Those who were affiliated with lodges to the East and South of St. Thomas, under the jurisdiction of one of the English Grand Lodges, could not attend or affiliate with the Danish lodges because of their racial and religious restrictions. The Danish lodges would not allow either Jews or free-black or colored persons to join. Even if they had been able to visit or join, they would have found it difficult to follow the ceremonies, which were in Danish, German or French.

On 12 April 1819, the brethren petitioned Commandant VonScholten for permission to establish a Freemason's Lodge on St. Thomas under the Grand Lodge of England, which was granted. However, the charter for this lodge – Harmonic Lodge No.356 E.C. – was granted on 19 October

1818 by the Grand Lodge of England. No one knows for sure where the first meeting place was of the Harmonic Lodge, but it is known that it met in private homes and taverns. The notes by some of the Lodge's historians record the first meeting place as Apollo Miller's Tavern on 24 June 1819. The first Master was James Miller who lived on Main Street in the capital city.

In 1989, Harmonic Lodge No.356 E.C. on St. Thomas was placed under the jurisdiction of the District Grand Lodge of Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean. This lodge still exists today and founded a daughter lodge in 1998, St. Thomas Lodge No. 9679, which shares the Harmonic building and Temple. Both Lodges are chartered under the United Grand Lodge of England. The Harmonic Temple is also home to the Holy Royal Arch Chapter, Zetland Chapter No. 356, founded in 1871. This Chapter is chartered and administered by the Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of England. Sources: <http://www.harmoniclodge.com/> - [http://www.harmoniclodge.com/a\\_short\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_harmonic\\_.htm](http://www.harmoniclodge.com/a_short_history_of_the_harmonic_.htm)

**Myalism and Obeah** (only about 1.7 percent of the population claim to be “spiritists” but there are probably many more practitioners) are reportedly practiced in secret by some Afro-American Virgin Islanders, especially those who are not active members of Christian churches. **Myalism** is an African-derived belief system that developed among blacks in the British West Indies during the slavery period; **Obeah** is the specific practice of “black magic” or witchcraft by priests, known as “obeahmen.” The **Obeah Ordinances of 1867 and 1868**, which outlawed this practice, were adopted in the British colonial states of the Caribbean to demonize African tradition religion; some of these laws still exist in the books of independent Caribbean states.

One aspect of Obeah with which many visitors to the Virgin Islands are familiar (although they may not fully comprehend it) is the Mocko-Jumbie, or stilt dancer. In the Virgin Islands’ Obeah tradition, a Jumbie is an evil or lost spirit, related to the Kongo word *Nzumbi*, which led to the sensationalistic Zombies of Hollywood. Jumbie, however, retains more of the word's original meaning. It is sometimes associated with a child who has died before being baptized. Such a child is said to be forced to forever walk the earth at night, and is easily identified by its backward-facing feet. The connection between the Jumbie and death is extended into botany: *Abrus precatorius*, a species of tropical legume bears deadly toxic red and black seeds called Jumbies in English-speaking regions of the Caribbean. By contrast, the Mocko-Jumbie of the Virgin Islands is brightly colored, dances in the daylight, and is very much alive. The Mocko-Jumbie also represents the flip-side of spiritual darkness, as stilt-dancing is most popular around holy days and Carnival.

Source: <http://www.associatepublisher.com/e/o/ob/obeah.htm#hd2>

Small numbers of Bahai Faith, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and other Eastern religions are present in the USVI: **Bahai Faith** (U.S. Virgin Islanders and other nationalities), **Buddhism** (among Chinese immigrants and their descendants), **Hinduism** (among Asian Indian immigrants and their descendants), and **Islam** (among Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian Arab immigrants and their descendants). There is also a small but well-established Asian Indian community in the USVI, mostly on St. Thomas. The Asian Indian community is made up primarily of Sindhis.

**Bahai Faith** (0.2 percent of the population, or about 200 people).

**Buddhism.** In 2006, Dr. May Trieu, a Chinese Buddhist acupuncturist-physician born in Vietnam at the height of the Vietnam War, was the driving force behind the construction of a

three-building complex to house the first Buddhist temple in the Virgin Islands: the Nirvana Temple in Estate Mandahl, St. Thomas. There are only a few Buddhists in the USVI.

**Hinduism.** According to the 2001 census, there were more than 400 **Hindus** in the U.S. Virgin Islands (0.4 percent of the population). Most of them were recent immigrants from India, and most of them reside on St. Thomas.

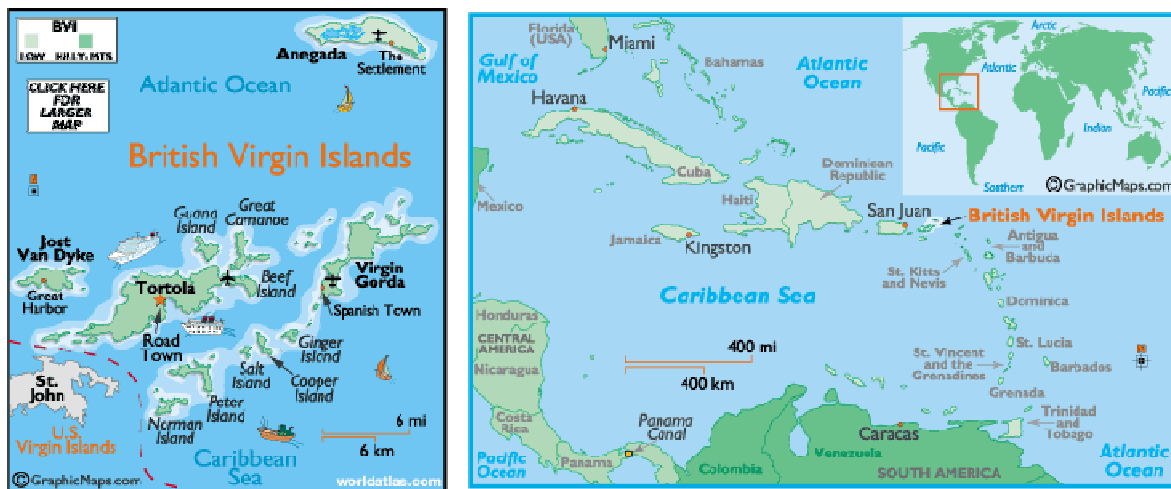
**Islam** (0.1 percent of the population in 2005, or about 110 people)

## Religion in the British Virgin Islands

### Country Overview

The British Virgin Islands (BVI) are located in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean Sea, just east of Puerto Rico. They include about 50 (mostly uninhabited) islands and cays totaling 59 sq miles (153 sq km) of land. The major islands are Tortola (the largest, about twelve miles long and three miles wide at its broadest part, the total area of which is about 21 square miles), Virgin Gorda, Jost Van Dyke and Anegada. The highest point is Mt. Sage at 1,780 feet (521 meters) on Tortola.

Tourism is a major business in the BVI, as it generates an estimated 45 percent of the national income. The BVI economic structure is similar to that of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and both use the U.S. Dollar as their local currency.



Fought over for centuries, this territory was finally controlled by the British in the mid-1600s, and later became an official British colony (1672). Steeped in the history of the British Navy, the islands are ringed by shipwrecks; the most famous of these -- *The RMS Rhone* -- is now a national marine park and a favorite scuba diving point.

The capital city is Road Town (pop. 9,400 in 2004), located on the horseshoe-shaped Road Harbor in the centre of Tortola's south coast. Today, it is crammed with markets, boutiques and restaurants, and has become a favorite stop for cruise ship passengers.

The population of the BVI was 21,730 in 2003 of which three-quarters reside on Tortola. Fifty percent of the total BVI population is made up of native British Virgin Islanders, with the remainder comprised largely of nationals from other Caribbean countries. The 2004 census reported the following ethnic composition: 83.4 percent are of African-heritage (Afro-American); 7 percent are of European heritage (caucasian); and 9.6 percent are "other" (includes Amerindian, East Indian, Middle Eastern and mixed race). The primary language is British

English and **Virgin Islands Creole**, an English-based creole spoken in the U.S. Virgin Islands and the nearby islands of Saba, Saint Martin and Sint Eustatius.

### **Current Status of Religion**

In 2001, about 84 percent of the population of the BVI were Protestant (Methodist, 33 percent; Anglican/ Episcopal, 17 percent; Church of God, 9 percent; Seventh-Day Adventist, 5 percent, Baptist, 4 percent; and others, 18 percent), Roman Catholic, 10 percent; other religions (including Jehovah's Witnesses, 2 percent) were 4 percent; and none, 2 percent.

In 1991, religious affiliation was given as: Protestant, 84 percent (Methodist, 33 percent; Anglican 17 percent; Church of God, 9 percent; Seventh-Day Adventist, 6 percent; Baptist, 4 percent; other 15 percent); Roman Catholic, 10 percent; other, 4 percent (includes Jehovah's Witnesses, 2 percent); and none 2 percent. Note: Nine percent of the population was reported as adherents of the "Church of God" but this could include several denominations: Church of God (Cleveland, TN – aka New Testament Church of God), Church of God of Prophecy, Church of God (Anderson, IN), and/or any other group with the name "Church of God."

### **Overview of Social, Economic and Political Development**

The Dutch privateer Joost van Dyk organized the first permanent settlements in the territory at Soper's Hole on the West End of Tortola. He and his band of men traded with the Spanish settlers in Puerto Rico and farmed cotton and tobacco.

By 1625, Joost van Dyk had moved his base of operations to Road Town and was recognized by the Dutch West India Company as the private "Patron" of Tortola. During that year, van Dyk gave some limited logistical support to Dutch Admiral Boudewijn Hendricksz, who raided San Juan, Puerto Rico. In September 1625, in retaliation, the Spanish forces assaulted Tortola and destroyed its settlements. Joost van Dyk himself escaped to the island that would later bear his name, and sought shelter from the Spanish. He later moved on to St. Thomas until the Spanish gave up their search for him and returned to Puerto Rico.

Despite Spanish hostility, the Dutch West India Company considered the Virgin Islands to have an important strategic value, because they were located approximately half way between the Dutch colonies in South America (now Suriname) and the most important Dutch settlement in North America, New Amsterdam (now New York City). Large stone warehouses were built at Freebottom, near Port Purcell (east of Road Town), to be used to facilitate exchanges of cargo between North and South America.

In 1640, 1646 and 1647, Spain forces attacked the Dutch West India Company settlement at Road Town on Tortola for the purpose of killed everyone and destroyed the settlement. However, apparently, they did not attack the smaller settlements further up the coast at Baugher's Bay or on Virgin Gorda.

The Dutch settlements, themselves, were not economically success, and there is evidence that the Dutch spent most of their time engaged in privateering than in trading. The lack of prosperity of the territory mirrored the lack of commercial success of the Dutch West India Company as a

whole. The company changed its policy and offered Tortola and Virgin Gorda to private persons for settlement and to establish slave pens. Tortola was eventually sold to Willem Hunthum during the 1650s, at which time the Dutch West India Company's interest in the territory effectively ended.

In 1665, the Dutch settlers on Tortola were attacked by a British privateer, John Wentworth, who captured 67 slaves that were taken to Bermuda. This is the first official record of slaves being held in the territory. Subsequently, in 1666, there were reports that a number of the Dutch settlers were driven out by an influx of British "brigands and pirates," although clearly a number of the Dutch settlers remained.

The territory came under British control in 1672 at the outbreak of the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672-1674) and has remained that way. Tortola was placed the protection of Colonel Sir William Stapleton, the English Governor-General of the Leeward Islands.

By the Treaty of Westminster in 1674, the war was ended and provision was made for mutual restoration of all territorial conquests during the war. Although the treaty provided the Dutch with the right to resume possession of the islands, by then the Dutch were at war with the French and fear of a French attack prevented their immediate restoration. Although the territory was not considered very valuable, for strategic reasons the British were reluctant to surrender the islands. After prolonged discussions, orders were issued to Stapleton in June 1677 to retain possession of Tortola and the surrounding islands.

Although the islands that currently form the British Virgin Islands have been under British control since 1672, a number of other islands came under the control of the British Crown (some more than once) during the subsequent period but no longer form part of the territory. At the time the British took control of the territory, the following islands were considered part of the Virgin Islands: *St. Thomas*, *St. John* and *St. Croix* (now part of the U.S. Virgin Islands) and *Vieques* (now part of the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico).

Britain would actually conquer St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix in March 1801 during the Napoleonic wars, but they restored them to Danish control by the Treaty of Amiens in March 1802. They were then re-taken in December 1807, but were restored again by the Treaty of Paris of 1815. Thereafter they would remain under Danish control until 1917, when they were sold to the U.S. Government for \$25 million dollars and later renamed the "U.S. Virgin Islands."

In 1678, the British appointed a deputy-governor for the territory (initially including Saba and St. Eustatius, until these islands were returned to the Dutch), but that role was somewhat vague: no legislative, executive or judicial powers were attached to it. In 1709, Governor Parke observed that the inhabitants "live like wild people without law or Government, and have neither Divine nor Lawyer amongst them..." Bryan Edwards' *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793: 441) gives the population in 1756 as 1,236 whites and 6,121 blacks.

Between 1680 and 1700, the islands of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, Jost van Dyke, and surrounding smaller islands, were settled by English planters and their slaves from Anguilla. A

glimpse of the early development of plantation society (based on the cultivation of sugarcane, cotton, ginger and indigo) on Tortola is provided by Charles F. Jenkins (1923: 45):

The constant influx of slaves and the increasing production of sugar and cotton, sold at good prices, was pouring wealth into the Island. Gradually the cane fields were extended and crept up the steep hillsides, through laborious terracing by the toiling blacks. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, practically the whole Island was under cultivation. The stony mountain roads, inaccessible for wheeled vehicles, were often blocked by trains of mules bearing between them, front and back, casks of sugar suspended on long poles. Cotton and rum, the latter mostly shipped to the American Colonies, contributed their share of prosperity. Shipping and trade grew by leaps and bounds and the value of plantations greatly increased ... Hurricanes swept over the islands, and lesser tropical storms brought devastation in their wake.

In 1734, the three islands of Anguilla, Virgin Gorda and Tortola were the only islands of the Virgin Islands group fully inhabited by His Majesty's subjects. They had no immediate communication with Great Britain or any part of Europe. In 1756, the total population of this territory was 1,263 whites and 6,121 African slaves.

It was not until 1773 that the British Virgin Islands actually had its own legislature. The uncertainty of tenure and slightly ambivalent official British attitude to the fate of the territory influenced the early population – for many years only debtors from other islands, pirates and those fleeing the law were prepared to undertake the risk of settling in the BVI. Most references to the islands from occasional visitors comment on the lack of law and order and the lack of religiosity of the inhabitants.

The territory was granted a Legislative Assembly on 27 January 1774; however, it took a full further decade for a constitutional framework to be established. Part of the problem was that the islands were so thinly populated that it was almost impossible to constitute the necessary organs of government. In 1778, George Suckling (a British lawyer) arrived in Tortola as the appointee to become the territory's Chief Justice. However, a court was not actually established until the Court Bill was passed in 1783. Even then the vested interests ensured that Suckling could still not take up his position, and the islands had a court but no judge. Suckling finally left the islands in May 1788, after 14 weeks, without ever taking up his post or ever being paid for his services. Suckling was forthright in expressing his views on the state of law and order in the territory (Suckling 1780: 66-67): the Chief Justice "found the inhabitants in a tumultuous and lawless state... where life, liberty and property were hourly exposed to the insults and depredations of the riotous and lawless. The authority of His Majesty's Council, as conservators of the peace, was defied and ridiculed..." The island presented "a shocking state of anarchy; miserable indeed, and disgraceful to government, not to be equaled in any other of His Majesty's dominions or perhaps in any civilized country in the world."

Almost 30 years later, upon his appointment in 1810, Governor George Elliot was struck by the "state of irritation ... almost of anarchy". Dr. Jerrard John Howard, a ship's surgeon for an agent selling a distressed cargo of slaves from a shipwreck in Tortola in 1803, wrote: Tortola "is well nigh the most miserable, worst-inhabited spot in all the British possessions... this unhealthy part of the globe appears overstocked with each description of people except honest ones" (Norwell Harrigan: 1971).



As Tortola and to a lesser extent Virgin Gorda came to be settled by British plantation owners, slave labor became economically essential, and there was an exponential growth in the slave population during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The slave population increased from 547 in 1717 to 1,430 in 1724 and to 6,121 in 1756. At the time of the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 August 1834 by the British Government, 5,792 slaves were freed in the British Virgin Islands; but at the time of abolition, there were already a considerable number of free blacks in the territory, possibly as many as 2,000.

Beginning in 1808, hundreds of Africans who were freed from slave ships by the British Royal Navy were deposited on Tortola; after serving a 14 year "apprenticeship," these slaves were then absolutely free. After seeing free Africans living and working in the territory, many of the existing slave population became enormously resentful and jealous to the point of rebelling against their slave masters.

The first notable uprising occurred in 1790 and was centered on the estates of Isaac Pickering; it was quickly put down, and the ring leaders were executed. The revolt was sparked by the rumor that freedom had been granted to slaves in England, but that the planters were withholding knowledge of it. The same rumor would later spark subsequent revolts on Tortola and elsewhere in the British West Indies. Subsequent rebellions on Tortola also occurred in 1823 at Pickering's estate, in 1827 at George Nibb's estate, and in 1830 at the Lettsome estate, although in each case they were quickly put down by the local militia.

Probably the most significant slave insurrection occurred in 1831 when a plot was uncovered to kill all of the white males in the territory and to escape to Haiti (which was at the time the only free black republic in the world) by boat with all of the white females. Although the plot does not appear to have been especially well formulated, it caused widespread panic and military assistance was brought in from St. Thomas. A number of the plotters (or accused plotters) were executed.

After abolition of slavery, the Territory experienced severe economic decline. However, the causes of the decline were numerous. The territory was devastated by a series of hurricanes. A particularly damaging hurricane struck in 1837, which was reported to have completely destroyed 17 of the territory's sugar works, the most lucrative export in the islands. Further hurricanes hit in 1842 and 1852, and two more struck in 1867. Tortola also suffered severe drought between 1837 and 1847, which made sugar plantations almost impossible to sustain. To compound these miseries, in 1846 the United Kingdom passed the Sugar Duties Act 1846 to equalize duties on sugar grown in the British West Indies, which had the net effect of causing prices to fall. In December 1853, there was a disastrous outbreak of cholera in the territory, which killed nearly 15 percent of the population. This was followed by an outbreak of smallpox in Tortola and Jost Van Dyke in 1861.

One of the defining elements of the economic decline of the territory was the insurrections of 1848 and 1853. The newly freed black population became increasingly disenchanted that freedom had not brought the prosperity for which they had hoped. Economic decline had led to increased tax burdens, which became a source of general discontent for former slaves and other residents of the territory alike.

The insurrection of 1853 was a very serious affair and had lasting consequences. The most direct cause was the imposition of a head tax on cattle in the territory, which seriously impacted black rural farmers. With a particularly bad sense of judgment, the tax came into force on the anniversary of Emancipation, and was enforced in an injudicious manner. All but four of the white inhabitants fled, and most plantation houses were burned to the ground.

The riots were eventually suppressed with military assistance from St. Thomas, and by reinforcements of British troops dispatched by the Governor of the Leeward Islands from Antigua. However, most of the white plantation owners who had formerly controlled the territory elected not to return to their ruined and insolvent estates. Realistically, from that point in time, the territory was almost solely populated by the former slaves who then made up the vast majority of the population. By 1893, there were only two white people resident on Tortola, the deputy Governor and the island's doctor.

The British Virgin Islands were administered variously as part of the British Leeward Islands or with St. Kitts and Nevis, with an Administrator representing the British Government on the islands. Separate colony status was gained for the BVI in 1960 and they became autonomous in 1967.

Since the 1960s, the BVI have diversified away from their traditionally agriculture-based economy towards tourism and financial services, becoming one of the wealthiest areas in the Caribbean. The "twin pillars" of the economy are tourism and financial services. Politically, tourism is the more important of the two, as it employs a greater number of people within the Territory, and a larger proportion of the businesses in the tourist industry are locally owned, as are a number of the highly tourism-dependent sole traders (e.g. taxi drivers and street vendors). Economically however, financial services associated with the territory's tax haven status are by far the more important. 51.8 percent of the Government's revenue comes directly from license fees for offshore companies, and considerable further sums are raised directly or indirectly from payroll taxes relating to salaries paid within the trust industry sector (which tend to be higher on average than those paid in the tourism sector).

Agriculture and industry account for only a small proportion of the islands' GDP. Agricultural produce includes fruit, vegetables, sugar cane, livestock and poultry, and industries include rum distillation, construction and boat building.

The islands are heavily dependent upon migrant labor. In 2004, migrant workers accounted for 50 percent of the total population. Thirty-two percent of workers employed in the British Virgin Islands work for the Government.

Today, executive authority in British Virgin Islands is invested in the Queen and is exercised on her behalf by the Governor of the British Virgin Islands. The Governor is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the British Government. Defense and Foreign Affairs remain the responsibility of the United Kingdom.

A new constitution was adopted in 2007 (the Virgin Islands Constitution Order, 2007) and came into force when the Legislative Council was dissolved for the 2007 general election. The Head of Government under the new constitution is the Premier (prior to the new constitution the office

was referred to as Chief Minister), who is elected in a general election along with the other members of the ruling government as well as the members of the opposition. A Cabinet is nominated by the Premier and appointed by the Governor. The Legislature consists of the Queen (represented by the Governor) and a unicameral House of Assembly made up of 13 elected members plus the Speaker and the Attorney-General. The current Governor is William Boyd McCleary (since 2010). The current Premier is Ralph T. O'Neal (since 22 August 2007).

## **Overview of Religious Development in the British Virgin Islands**

### *Older Liturgical Christian Denominations*

**The Roman Catholic Church** (10 percent of the population in 2001), with the following parishes: Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church in East End; St. Ursula Catholic Church in The Valley, Virgin Gorda; and St. Williams Roman Catholic Church on Main Street.

**The Episcopal Diocese of the Virgin Islands - U.S. Episcopal Church** (17 percent of the population), with three churches: St. Georges Anglican Church in Road Town; St. Mary's Anglican Church in The Valley, Virgin Gorda; and St. Paul's Anglican Church in Sea Cows Bay.

### *Pietist and Holiness Denominations*

**Society of Friends/Quakers.** The English Quaker missionary Joshua Fielding visited Tortola and Virgin Gorda in 1727, during his historic Caribbean tour of 1726-1729. Fielding discovered that the majority of the inhabitants were African slaves who were owned by only a few white settlers, numbering 78 on Virgin Gorda and about 100 on Tortola. During Fielding's 10-day visit he was befriended by Tortola's governor, John Pickering, and his wife who became believers and began holding Quaker meetings in their home. Later, from London, Fielding sent the Pickerings several Quaker books for their spiritual nourishment. According to John Coakley Lettsom (Jenkins 1923: 42), Governor Pickering:

By industry ... became possessed of a large tract of uncultivated land, and by perseverance he covered it with Canes and Cotton, and gradually rose to be one of the wealthiest Planters in the West Indies. He was, about his fortieth year, made Governor of the Island of Tortola, and held the rank of Major in the Insular Militia. At length he publicly professed the religious principles of the Quakers and relinquished all his civil and military honours and employments.

Some years later, Mr. James Birkett, a Quaker from Lancaster, England, arrived to trade a cargo of Dry Goods with Tortola's inhabitants. After he discovered that there was a small group of Quakers on the island, he persuaded them to meet twice a week at the governor's house for mutual encouragement. By April 1741, 30 people were attending the Quaker meetings regularly at the governor's house.

Another Quaker missionary, Thomas Chalkley from Philadelphia, visited Tortola during 1741 and was given lodging in Governor John Pickering's house at Fat Hog Bay. Many Quaker meetings were conducted by Chalkley during his two-week visit, with the governor and his wife attended many of them. However, Chalkley came down with a high fever and died about a week later; he was buried at Fat Hog Bay on 4 September 1741. According to the minutes of the

Tortola Monthly Meeting, by early 1742 a Quaker meeting house had been built near the governor's residence (Jenkins (1923:17):

Governor Pickering had donated a plot of ground near his home for graveyard purposes and was erecting a meeting-house nearby. This was land formerly known to have been his father's, adjoining the place where the governor lived. It was enclosed with a prickly pear fence and contained about one-half acre, also a house within the enclosure furnished with the conveniences for a meeting-house, all of which he freely gave to the people called Quakers, as long as there were any Friends in the Island, which he earnestly hoped would be as long as Tortola remained inhabited.

Although few in number, the Quaker community in the BVI – between 1727 and 1768 – would play an important part in the history of the territory for two main reasons. First, the strong opposition of the Quakers to slavery had a contributing effect to the improvements in the treatment of slaves within the territory compared to other Caribbean islands, and to the large number of free blacks within the islands. Second, a large number of famous historical figures came from that small community, including *John C. Lettsome* (an English physician and philanthropist, born on Little Jost Van Dyke in 1744, who founded the Medical Society of London in 1773), *William Thornton* (an English physician, inventor, painter and architect, born on Jost Van Dyke in 1759, who designed the United States Capitol and was the first Superintendent of the United States Patent Office), *Samuel Nottingham* (in 1776 he freed 25 slaves and gave them 50 acres of land at Long Look on Tortola, and directed them to cultivate it for the common good – Long Look Estate claims to be the oldest free black estate in the Western world), and *Richard Humphreys* (born on Tortola in 1750, he became the founder of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the oldest historically black university in the USA).

The closing words of the final business session of Tortola Monthly Meeting of Friends, in 1762, were "The Meeting ends in love." Although the business meeting had ceased to function, meetings for worship were continued for some years by the few Friends who remained in the islands. The Quakers in London continued to send books to the Tortola Friends from time to time, with the last consignment in 1774.

The London Yearly Meeting terminates its correspondence with the Tortola Friends in 1786 with a letter signed by John Coakley Lettsom and Zachariah Cockfield and addressed to Isaac Pickering and Samuel Wyley, who were apparently still living there at that time. This would seem to close the official connection of either the Quakers in London or Philadelphia with Tortola Friends, thereby marking a period of 45 years covering the birth, the activity, the decline and termination of this interesting episode in Quaker history. With some possible exceptions, Dr. Lettsom wrote, in 1804, that he was the sole surviving West Indian Quaker in the Virgin Islands.

The ownership of slaves by some of the Quakers in the BVI, including John Pickering, was first acknowledged in 1759 in correspondence with the London Friends.

Throughout Tortola, as everywhere in the West Indies, slavery was general. The estimated number of blacks in the Island about the time we are considering was at least ten thousand. John Pickering owned five hundred or more at his death, and one planter a little later owned as many as a thousand. The slave trade was bringing wealth to the wharves of Liverpool, Bristol and London. The West Indian islands were the principal market for these human chattels. Ships, loaded with sugar, rum and cotton for Great Britain, completed the triangle by sailing for the Guinea Coast,

bringing their loads of stolen, manacled and suffering blacks to be sold in the principal slave centers, and to be further distributed among the smaller islands. Black folks had no souls except in the Catholic islands, and Friends had been severely punished for allowing them to attend meetings in Barbados.

But already here and there, little candle lights of protest were burning in the darkness. The agitation in the Society of Friends for the abolition of human slavery, begun in America by the little Meeting of German Friends in my home-town of Germantown in 1688, was carried on through the succeeding years by Ralph Sandiford, Benjamin Lay, Anthony Benezet, John Woolman and others. The importing and buying of negroes was made a matter of discipline in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1754, and the agitation against owning slaves became more and more active and earnest.

In Thomas Clarkson's absorbing book, *The History of the Rise and Abolition of the Slave Trade*, is a chart showing the sources from which came the currents in this great movement. The little springs of individual protest, uniting, form the rivulets of organized effort, which in turn made the great rivers of public opinion which were finally to wash the evil thing away. And because we had slavery in our midst, there is reason that the American river of opposition to slavery was a mighty Amazon with many affluents, so many in fact, there was hardly room along its banks for the entry of any River of Doubt.

There is little information as to the treatment of slaves in Tortola. The minutes of the Meeting mention them but once. While Dr. Lettsom was on the Island, he was sent for by a hardhearted master to cut off the leg of a negro who had run away and been recaptured. It is needless to say how greatly he was shocked. We have seen how John Pickering's slaves mourned his death. The case of Arthur Hodge, of Tortola, an educated, wealthy planter, a little later became a cause celebre. He was hanged for the murder of a slave who had run away, whom he had beaten so unmercifully that he died. It was shown at his trial that this was a common practice.

In 1802, but a few years before its abolition, there were 155 vessels engaged in the slave trade, capable of carrying 40,000 blacks, four-fifths of whom went to the British West Indies. In 1803, a ship load of slaves arrived in Tortola and was publicly auctioned off to the planters. Our Abolition Society, uniting the efforts of Friends and others, was formed in 1774, and its English counterpart, ten years later, when Clarkson and others, building on the firm foundation which Friends in England had laid, began the agitation which in but little more than twenty years forced Parliament, in 1807, to pass the first Act prohibiting the slave trade. A second generation of devoted workers continued the work, until the liberation of the slaves in the West Indies was decreed by Parliament in 1833, to take effect August 1, 1834. It provided for a system of apprenticeship, of four years for house servants and of seven years for agricultural laborers, the planters fearing that immediate freedom would bring a cessation of all labor, the ruin of their industries, and possibly uprisings of the blacks. None of these evils seriously developed, and in 1838 the apprenticeship system was brought to an end before its time, and, quoting the Act of Parliament, "Slavery shall be, and is hereby utterly and forever abolished throughout the British colonies, plantations and possessions."

It was indeed an unusual step, way in advance of its time, when John Coakley Lettsom, returning to Tortola fresh from the influences of Dr. Fothergill and other English abolitionists, freed his slaves in 1768, as has already been pointed out. A near relative wished to take similar action at the time, but Lettsom discouraged him. Samuel and Mary Nottingham later followed Lettsom's example. These Friends, having lived several years in the freer atmosphere of Long Island, returned to Tortola uneasy over the ownership of fellow-men. They finally manumitted all their

slaves and gave them their plantation, Long Look on Fat Hog Bay, as a home, to be enjoyed by them in perpetuity as tenants in common. The Nottinghams left the Island for Long Island, and in 1778, removed to England. Not long after, they wrote a letter<sup>1</sup> which shows the continuance of their deep interest in the welfare of their emancipated slaves. This was preserved by the blacks for many years in the nature of a title deed for their holdings. The presence of these Nottingham free negroes was not relished by the planters still owning slaves, and opinions differ as to their real welfare, according to the focus of the glasses which viewed their progress. Some of them took to maritime pursuits; and burning the coral rock for lime, with which they obtained ready money in St. Thomas, was one of their vocations. We shall see later how friendly abolitionists regarded the experiment.

**The Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA).** Methodist adherents accounted for 33 percent of the population in 2001, with 10 churches located at Cane Garden Bay, Road Town, Belle Vue, Percell Estate, The Valley-Virgin Gorda, Carrot Bay, Jost Van Dyke, Anegada, Chapel Hill-East End, and Zion Hill-West End.

After Quakerism began to decline in the territory (1727-1786), the Methodist mission began to pick up force. Methodists were not opposed to slavery *per se*, but a number of freed Africans were accepted warmly within the Methodist Church, and as a result the church tended to advocate better treatment of enslaved Africans. The Methodists also provided the first real schooling available to Africans, and the education of slaves and former slaves may have gradually helped their acceptance by white plantation owners as human who deserved humane treatment.

The early history of Wesleyan Methodist missions in the British Virgin Islands is recounted as follows by George and Mary Grace Findlay in *Wesley's World Parish* (1913: 55):

Tortola (in the Leeward Islands) was visited by [Dr. Thomas] Coke in 1788-89, who removed [William] Hammett thither from St. Kitt's. The "abundant entrance" in this island was followed for a while by declension. With Tortola went the rest of the Virgin Islands; the whole group was thoroughly missioned. A signal tribute was paid to the character of the Methodist converts of Tortola and the Virgin Islands in the fact that, when a French invasion was in prospect, the Governor armed the whole body of the black people, including the slaves, with the missionary at their head, and the danger was thus averted.

In *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society* (Volume II), by Findlay and Holdsworth (1921: 145-146), the history of Methodist work in the BVI is continued:

In Tortola, the British capital of the cluster of Virgin Islands, William Hammet had the same astonishing success as in St. Kitts. In 1793 the Tortola Circuit counted 1,496 church members, out of a total population (in the British Virgin Islands) of 8,000, seven-eighths of whom were slaves.

Almost the whole body of the Tortola Negroes was affected by the Mission. The Moravians laboured with great success at the important harbour of St. Thomas and in adjoining Danish Islands; outside the sphere of their influence the area of the Virgin Isles was destitute of religious ordinances when Methodism arrived. At first the Methodist preaching seemed to carry everything before it.

By the year 1796 above 3,000 black folk were gathered into the Society—well nigh half the slave population. In no other West Indian locality—scarcely anywhere else in the world—did

Methodism become so largely and suddenly a mass-movement. But relapse is apt to follow wholesale conversion. In 1797 the above figure was reduced in the official report to something over 1,300; next year it was doubled again!

Discrimination and effective discipline were immensely difficult for a couple of Missionaries dealing with thousands of ignorant Negroes pressing into the Church under a wave of sympathetic excitement, especially when the individual Ministers stayed so short a time upon the ground. The Tortola membership continued to show exceptional fluctuations; expulsions on account of immorality were rife in the early years. By degrees the work extended to the numerous little patches of rocky land studding the ocean round Tortola, until all the inhabited islets within the British province stood upon the Tortola Circuit Plan.

The **Church of God Holiness** has churches at Major Bay, Tortuga, North Sound, Taylors Bay and Virgin Gorda (five churches). The **Church of the Nazarene** reports mission work in the BVI; this jurisdiction is part of the Leeward/Virgin Islands District of the Church of the Nazarene, with headquarters in St. John's, Antigua. The **Church of God (Anderson, IN)** also reports mission work in the BVI.

#### *Baptist Denominations (4 percent of the population)*

**Six Baptist churches were reported but without any denominational affiliation:** Bethany Baptist Church in Long Look; Cane Garden Bay Baptist Church at Cane Garden Bay, Road Town; Faith Baptist Church on Main Street in Road Town; Road Town Baptist Church in Road Town; Mt. Carmel Baptist Church at Belmont Estate, West End; and New Life Baptist Church at Duff's Bottom, Tortola. Some of these churches may be affiliated with the **Southern Baptist Convention** or the **Association of Baptist for World Evangelism (ABWE)** in the USA.

**Sovereign Grace Baptist Churches:** First Baptist Church, Lower Estate, Tortola.

#### *Adventist Denominations*

**Seventh-day Adventist Church** (6 percent of the population), with nine churches in the BVI, including Road Town, Carrot Bay and East End Bay. The BVI are part of the North Caribbean Conference, with headquarters in Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI, which reported 68 churches and 24,223 church members in 2008.

#### *Pentecostal Denominations and Independent Churches*

**The New Testament Church of God** (affiliated with the Church of God of Cleveland, TN) on Tortola was started in 1970 by Pastor George Best, a native of Grenada. It was a group of about 15 to 20 persons who met under a tree. This handful of expatriates from the Eastern Caribbean who migrated to Tortola in pursuit of a better economical living was the beginning of this denomination in the BVI. There were people from Nevis, St. Kitts, Grenada, Antigua and St. Vincent. The first five persons were baptized in 1970 as new believers.

In 1976, this new group of believers moved into their own building, from which the Pentecostal message began to spread over the entire island. A new group of gospel singers was organized,

called the “Regenerated Singers,” who have touched thousands of lives all over the Caribbean and North America.

In July 1989, a new era began when the 19 years of ministry of Pastor George Best came to a close; he moved on to continue his ministry in St. Thomas, USVI. The church was then led by Bishop Ishmael and Patricia Charles, who ministered to a congregation of about 100 members. Soon, the “dedicated prayers of the saints for years began to materialize; the power of darkness was crumbling; miracles, salvation, healings, revivals, blessings and deliverances” began to take place, which led to a period of “explosive growth” for the congregation.

In 1992, the original building was renovated and expanded; every area of ministry was out-grown. Three new churches were birthed out of this congregation on different parts of the island. In 1999, new property was purchased in Baugher's Bay, work on the new sanctuary began in 2000, and on 25 October 2003 a new tabernacle was dedicated with seating for over 1,500 people.

The church is now known as the *New Testament Church of God International Worship Centre* under the leadership of **Bishop Ishmael Charles and Lady Patricia Charles**, and is now reaching the entire Caribbean through weekly television and radio programs and live streaming Internet weekly. The congregation sponsors approximately 30 local operating ministries. More than 30 nationalities and ethnic groups are part of this congregation.

Other affiliated churches are located in Purcell Estate, Road Town; The Valley, Virgin Gorda; West End, Tortola; Upper Room Church of God at Little Dix Hill, Virgin Gorda.

**Church of God of Prophecy** (five churches): Hope Hill, Huntums Ghut, Old Plantation at Josiah's Bay, Long Look and Long Swamp.

***Other Pentecostal denominations and independent churches include:*** the Apostolic Faith Mission (East End and Wickham's Cay), Assemblies of God (Lower Estate and The Valley, Virgin Gorda), Christian Faith Assembly (Botanic Station, Road Town), Gospel of Jesus Evangelistic Pentecostal Church (Sea Cows Bay), Agape Total Life Center (Anderson Hill), Oasis Christian Assembly (Road Town), and Mt. Calvary Deliverance Temple (The Settlement, Anegada).

***Ecumenical activities:*** *British Virgin Islands Christian Council.* The current president is the Rev. Vankys Isaacs, a Moravian minister. One of the Council's main objectives is to provide a means by which the churches in the British Virgin Islands can come together to study problems, opportunities and challenges in the Christian way of life and co-ordinate actions, based on the common policy of the churches, to preserve the spiritual, moral, educational, social and economic welfare of the society.

**Other Religions** (other religions, 4 percent; none, 2 percent)

**Jehovah's Witnesses** (Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society), with 2 percent of the population in 2001; churches are located at Huntum's Ghut and The Valley on Virgin Gorda. Also, there is a small presence of the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** (Mormons).



**Freemasonry:** *St. Ursula Lodge No. 8952 E.C.* is located in Road Town, Tortola. St. Ursula is the patron saint of the BVI, and the lodge banner depicts her on a yellow background holding a lighted lamp, framed by eleven similar lamps, each representing 1,000 nuns. The lodge was consecrated in August 1980 under sad circumstances. The only locally available Past Masters, who had made every effort to formulate the lodge, both died just before the consecration date. The sponsoring lodge, *Harmonic Lodge No. 356 E.C.*, was located in the USVI about 30 miles by sea, and the only one in the territory to come directly under the *Grand Lodge of England*. By 1986, the brethren had generated sufficient funds to acquire a piece of land to build their own temple, and in February of that year the foundation stone was laid in accordance with ancient custom. The ceremony was performed in the presence of the Governor of the British Virgin Islands and a large contingent of the public.

Many members of the St. Ursula Lodge are companions of *Zetland Royal Arch Chapter No. 356* and the *Harmonic Lodge* based on St. Thomas, USVI. On 2 September 1996, a *Chapter Rose Croix No. 1105* was consecrated in the temple on Tortola.

However, earlier Masonic lodges were established in the BVI by the Schismatics or Antients, in 1760 and 1763, and by the rival organization – the original or legitimate, Grand Lodge of England in 1765. Each of these lodges in the BVI continued on the rolls of the mother lodges until the Union in 1813, when they all disappeared from the record books. The lodges were constituted as follows: Antients, No. 82, Virgin Gorda, in 1760; Antients, No. 108, Road Town, Tortola, in 1763; and the Grand Lodge of England No 351, Tortola and Beef Island, in 1765.

The British Virgin Islands are in the jurisdiction of the *Masonic District of Barbados and Eastern Caribbean*, which extends from St. Thomas in the USVI in the north to Grenada in the south, a distance of over 600 sea-miles, and embraces widespread islands, at least eleven of which have one English Constitution lodge. Source: <http://www.freemasonrytoday.com/12/p05.php>

**Myalism-Obeah** are reportedly practiced in secret by some Afro-American U.S. Virgin Islanders, especially those who are not active members of Christian churches. **Myalism** is an African-derived belief system that developed among blacks in the British West Indies during the slavery period; **Obeah** is the specific practice of “black magic” or witchcraft by priests, known as “obeahmen.” The **Obeah Ordinances of 1867 and 1868**, which outlawed this practice, were adopted in the British colonial states of the Caribbean to demonize African tradition religion; some of these laws still exist in the books of independent Caribbean states. The Mocko Jumbie or Moko Jumbie is a popular carnival figure who is a masked, costumed person on stilts who scares away evil spirits.

Like many other Caribbean islands, there is a significant Rastafari presence. Since 28 August 2003, **Rastafarians** can legally visit the BVI, following the removal of an executive order banning the religion’s adherents from entering the islands. The 23-year-old “Rasta Law” ordered immigration authorities to refuse entry to Rastafarians and “hippies,” most commonly identified by their dreadlocks. The religion emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s, and spread to other Caribbean islands and elsewhere, among the descendants of African slaves who were angry over the colonial oppression of blacks and were attempting to reconnect with their African roots.

**Small numbers of Bahai Faith, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and other Eastern religions are present in the BVI: Bahai Faith** (British Virgin Islanders and other nationalities), **Buddhism** (among Chinese immigrants and their descendants), **Hinduism** (among Asian Indian immigrants and their descendants), and **Islam** (about 1.2 percent of the population in 2005 among Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian Arab immigrants and their descendants)

Compiled and Edited by Clifton L. Holland  
Last updated on 22 January 2011

## Sources

Anderson, Justice C. *An Evangelical Saga: Baptists and Their Precursors in Latin America*. Longwood FL: Xulon Press, 2005.

Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) for "British Virgin Islands," available at: [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_33\\_2.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_33_2.asp)

Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) for "U.S. Virgin Islands," available at: [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_240\\_2.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_240_2.asp)

Barrett, Sr., Leonard E. *The Rastafarians*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997 (first published in 1988).

Brierly, Peter. *World Churches Handbook*. London, England: Christian Research, 1997.

Catholic Hierarchy website, "Diocese of Saint Thomas," available at: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dstth.html>

Dryfoot, Arthur Charles. *The Shaping of the West Indian Church, 1492-1962*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999; published jointly with The Press University of the West Indies in Jamaica.

Edwards, Bryan. *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. Two Volumes. Dublin, Ireland: Luke White Publishers, 1793; available at:

[http://books.google.com/books?id=DFomAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=DFomAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Fernández Olmos, Margarite y Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, editores. *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Findlay, George and Mary Grace. *Wesley's World Parish: A Sketch of the Hundred Years' Work of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*. London: Hodder and Staughton, 1913.

Findlay, George G. and William W. Holdsworth. *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*. Five Volumes/Volume II. London: The Epworth Press, 1921.

Harrigan, Norwell E. "A Profile of Social Development in the British Virgin Islands," in *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1971). Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico, Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1971.

Holland, Clifton L., editor. *World Christianity: Central America and the Caribbean*. Monrovia, CA: MARC-World Vision International, 1981.

Horowitz, Michael M., editor. *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean: An Anthropological Reader*. Garden City, NY: The Natural History Press, 1971.

Jenkins, Charles Francis. *Tortola: A Quaker Experiment of Long Ago in the Tropics*. London: Friends' Bookshop, 1923; available at: <http://www.archive.org/details/tortolaquakerexp00jenkuoft>

Kettani, Houssain. "The Muslim Population in the Americas." Proceedings of the 2009 International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities, Singapore, 9-11 October, 2009, pp. xxx-xxx; available at: <http://www.pupr.edu/hkettani/papers/ICSSH2009Americas.pdf>

Maynard, G. Oliver. *A History of the Moravian Church: Eastern West Indies Province*. Port of Spain, Trinidad: Yuille's Printerie, 1968.

Parker, J. Fred. *Mission to the World: A History of Missions in the Church of the Nazarene through 1985*. Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO, 1988.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 2009; available at:

<http://pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Topics/Demographics/Muslimpopulation.pdf>

Rogozinski, Jan. *A Brief History of the Caribbean, from the Arawak and Carib to the Present*. Revised Edition. New York City, NY: Plume Books – Penguin Group, 1999.

Suckling, George. *An Historical Account of the Virgin Islands, in the West Indies*. London: Printed for Benjamin White, 1780; available at: <http://books.google.com/ebooks?id=Y8ANAAAAQAAJ&hl=es>

Taylor, Patrick, editor. *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.

The Moravian Church Eastern West Indies Province website at:  
<http://www.moravianmission.org/partnerprovinces/westindies.phtml>

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Fact Book*. Available at:  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vq.html>

Virgin Islands Vacation Guide & Community website at: <http://www.vinow.com/about/>

(about 16,652 words)