

WELS OUTREACH IN THE CARIBBEAN
(On The Island Of Antigua And Beyond)

By
David P. Bitter

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When you here someone talk about Antigua what do you think about? Perhaps it's beautiful beaches, gorgeous sunsets, blue ocean water, continuous sunshine, palm trees, perfect weather, relaxed living - in short, the perfect vacation spot. If this is what you think about, you are correct. Antigua is one of several Caribbean islands which supplies the perfect climate and relaxed atmosphere for a vacation. There is much more however. Not only is Antigua a beautiful vacation spot, it's also the home of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, our WELS mission. Since 1973 St. John's has been conducting services and is continually growing. In this paper I will discuss the outreach efforts of this mission on the island of Antigua itself as well as the outreach efforts to the neighboring Caribbean islands.

First, an overview of the Caribbean and its people. The early history of the Caribbean before Columbus has accounts of the Carib and Arwak Indians who inhabited these islands, when most people talk about the history of the West Indies, they are referring to the periods of colonization, slavery and independence. For many years the islands of the Caribbean were considered jewels in the crown of mother countries (England, France, Spain) because of the great wealth they supplied - mainly from sugar cane. As this industry grew, slavery became more and more a part of the Caribbean.

According to 1980 census approximately 80% of the people from the islands can trace their roots back to slaveships that came from Africa. After slavery was abolished in the early 1800's, indentured servants were brought in. The majority of these servants came from India. About 40% of the population of Trinidad and 50% of the people of Guyana are descendants from India. A much smaller percentage of people on each island can trace their ancestry to other countries. (A Short History of the West Indies pg. 10) The

membership of our church in Antigua is a mixture of peoples coming from Africa, Syria, India, Brazil, Columbia, Sweden, Austria, Finland, England, Canada, Guyana, Trinidad and from other neighboring islands.

The islands of the Caribbean presently have economic and political struggle. It has been a great achievement for most of the islands to have become independent and to develop fairly stable democratic societies. With the increase of tourism economics have grown. In Antigua, there is virtually no unemployment because of the business generated by tourism.

Among these islands there is very little anti-American sentiment. In recent years the Caribbean islands look more and more to the United States for imports, industry, schooling, jobs, vacations, and financial support. A majority of the families on the more developed islands have family or friends who live in the States or Canada. Perhaps the single most American influence has been through the US cable television programs that are readily available in the Caribbean.

Despite the struggles, the Caribbean people are for the most part content and not overly concerned about tomorrow. Compared to the hustle and bustle lifestyle in America the Caribbean lifestyle is one of ease, less anxiety, and carefree. There is plenty of food. The weather is always beautiful so there is less pressure and less need to run back and forth. People are "event-oriented" rather than "time-oriented", therefore more concerned about what is going to happen than when it begins and ends. As a result church meetings, services don't start until the last person is there and no one is concerned when they end. Our missionaries must adapt to this life style which is so different from the US. (Interview

with Pastor Mark Henrich Feb. 1994)

Next we want to take a look at the religious climate of the Caribbean. The majority of the worship activity today stems from the colonization of the islands by England, Spain and France and the mission activity that followed. As explorers, conquistadors and traders began to open up this new world, missionaries and priests sought to civilize the indigenous people and form them into their brand of Christianity. The Spanish Catholics and Franciscans and Dominicans were leaving their mark on the islands back in the 1500's. The Africans who were brought over as slaves brought with them tribal religions that had been part of their lives. Conversion to Christianity was often superficial and many times combined with elements of other beliefs. (A Short History of the West Indies pg. 45)

The islands that had English influence have a strong Anglican presence today. The Anglican church, however, did not permit the slaves to fully participate in worship. Therefore, other groups like the Methodists and Moravians filled in the gaps and became popular with the black population.

Today the Catholic and Anglican church bodies are the largest in the Caribbean. The Methodist and Moravian have also made a strong foothold since the earlier years. Also the Seventh Day Adventist church is one of the fastest growing denominations. The Pentecostal groups too are on the rise due to their emphasis on enthusiasm which appeals to the black culture. (Report to the South Atlantic District Mission Board 1991 pg. 5)

The Caribbean is very Christian on paper but there is a great need to hear the pure gospel unhindered by those ^{who} wo have added conditions to it or those who have turned purely

political and social.

There are in some islands large numbers of non-Christian groups. Spiritual Baptists are throughout St. Vincent using occultic practices and Shango Bapisits in Trinidad practising black magic. These groups reflect the world of African spiritism. The Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are starting to make an impact. In Trinidad, Hinduism is strong (30%) because of the large East Indian population and the Muslim religion there is also increasing. the Rastifarian movement, "the Lion of Judah," with its deifying of Hale Selassie and its "sacramental use" of marijuana is evident everywhere with its followers wearing the unmistakable "dreadlocks". (Report to the South Atlantic District Mission Board 1991 pg. 5)

Some of the ministry challenges for a Christian church today revolve around the family structure that leaves the unmarried mother in charge of the household and of children as she struggles to raise them by herself. Also the mindset of living for the moment makes long range plans more difficult to work out. Some advantages in ministry among these islands are the spiritual longing in the people there, the love for singing spiritual songs, the openness to invite others and the helping out family and neighbors. With the loose moral and spiritual climate in the Caribbean, solid gospel oriented churches that teach the full council of God are greatly needed and appreciated. (Henrich interview Feb. 1994)

St. John's Lutheran Church in Antigua was founded by William O'Donoghue, a West Indian layperson. When he came into contact with Lutheran teaching he began to teach it in Antigua and gathered a small group that met for study and worship. In 1972 he asked the

Federation of Authentic Lutheranism (FAL), a group that broke off from LC-MS, to come in and help him carry on his small mission. The FAL welcomed them into their fellowship and in 1973 sent Rev. Donald Burch to be their pastor working with Mr. Donoghue. Attendance at worship services grew rapidly. By 1974 the Lutheran Primary school opened its doors in the unit built for worship in an area just outside the city of St. John's. (Report to the South Atlantic District Mission Board 1991 pg. 6)

In 1975 the FAL disbanded and handed the church to the WELS. In 1976 the present church building was constructed and additional rooms added to the classroom building. Through the preaching of the pure gospel by pastors and teachers and through the members' eagerness to invite others, the congregation has grown to its present size - 326 members, 207 communicant members.

The Lutheran primary school had a great impact from the outset and still does today. "It is certainly clear that any program which involves our long range commitment to Antiguans must provide for Christian education for the children in the environment of a Christian Day School." (report Feb. 17, 1973 - T. Thiele, FAL Foreign Mission Treasurer.) The school continues to play a large part in the ministry in Antigua as children and families are attracted to the message and ministry, and youth are given a foundation for future spiritual leadership.

St. John's Primary School operates to nurture and build up children for a solid Christian faith and life. Training is given to develop the students' God-given academic and social skills to the fullest of their potential. To this end the school offers a superior

academic program and school atmosphere that gains its focus from God's Word and involves parents and family in the school's continuing concern for the individual child and his future. The Primary School has three classrooms taught by well-trained experienced teachers (over 50 years of combined teaching experience). In 1994 the school's enrollment is around 68.

This school proves to be very valuable in outreach among the Antiguan. A study done in 1984 by Rev. Piepenbrink, who served in Antigua from 1980-84, showed that 40% of the membership at that time came as a direct result of the Christian School. Today that number has increased to 50%. At present 60-70% of the children in school are not members. In order to enroll their their children in school the parents are required to come to a Bible information class. In turn, many of them end up becoming members. (Henrich interview).

St. John's also offers a two year pre-school program for three and four year olds. The pre-school curriculum includes learning special social skills, coordination practice, and basic academic building blocks to give the children a solid foundation for Primary School. In conjunction with the Primary School, one of the Pre-school's major objectives is to lead the children to a greater understanding of Christ and his will for our lives. The Pre-school is run by two trained teachers together with two experienced assistants. The number of students at present is 38.

In addition to education for children St. John's realizes how essential adult spiritual growth is to their congregation and community. In 1992 they started the Caribbean

Christian Training Institute (CCTI) with graduated levels of study in Scriptures and training for specific forms of ministry in the church and community. They presently have two men in the classes.

Another way that St. John's is reaching out on the island of Antigua is through its members. The pastors are not required to go knocking door to door looking for new members. Their members are accustomed to inviting family and friends to join them at worship services. The pastors are then able to follow up later. This type of evangelism is a bit different. There are no big evangelism committees. There is not alot of initial knocking on doors with "God's Great Exchange" prepared to present. Rather, as current associate Pastor Mark Henrich put it, "the members do what comes naturally to the believer, they share Christ, they witness as a result of their faith." (1994 Mission Seminar)

Other outreach opportunities on the island of Antigua have presented themselves. The pastors are looking for better opportunities to better follow up those who have shown interest in the WELS church. One way is to impliment studying, worshipping, caring groups in many of the villages nearby. The idea is that the congregation would develop satellite groups that would use rented space for Bible Classes and perhaps evening worship. Although the main administration center, worship center and nurturing center would remain at St. John's, eventually each group might be able to have Sunday morning worship services and become an individual congregation.

With many children in one-parent homes, reaching out to children is an open door for the gospel to do its work. Vacation Bible School efforts have been very successful. In

July of 1993 eleven students from Northwestern Prep School in Watertown went to Antigua as part of Project Timothy. This program saw the students work together with members of St. John, Antigua, and Trinity, St. Lucia canvassing neighborhoods and teaching vacation Bible School. This trip was funded by a grant from the Siebert Foundation. WELS Kingdom Workers will sponsor the project for 1994. (NWL Jan 1994 pg, 6) A Girl/Boy Pioneer group is also being formed and the idea of Vacation Bible Schools in the individual villages is being discussed.

There are also special groups which the congregation would like to target with special outreach efforts. The Syrian population on the island is growing and many already have contact with the congregation through the pre-school and those who have already become members. The Spanish speaking population is another group on the list of concerns (if the language barrier can be overcome). On occasion night courses in English have been taught to these groups by the staff to help build the relationship with them (thus far two Spanish people who had been in the class have joined St. John's). For those who have roots elsewhere, St. John's hopes to provide training and materials to help them make greater inroads for the gospel into their home land (e.g. Syria, Dominican Republic, India, etc.). St. John's would like to be able to put into their hands materials such as the "Communicating Christ" video series translated into their native language.

The outreach efforts by St. John's is not limited to the island of Antigua, however. Antigua is only one of several islands in the West Indies. Often people move from one

island to another for various reasons. They take with them their faith and a need for that faith to be fed. As a result St. John's outreach has not only been on the island of Antigua but has reached out to nearby islands as well.

The pastors in Antigua have spent time visiting several of the other islands (St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent, Barbados, Trinidad, Dominica). Of these islands St. Lucia had the largest group of Lutherans and greatest need for assistance. For several years up to 1991 the pastors of St. John's were serving a core of Lutherans that had relocated there. In the early 1970's three families of doctors came over from India to work for the government of Antigua. These doctors were lifelong members of the Lutheran church in India and sought out the Lutheran church in Antigua. They were happy to find the small group that the lay evangelist Mr. William O'Donoghue had organized.

In the late 1970's after working in Antigua six years, the government failed to renew their work contract. This forced the doctors to seek work elsewhere. They moved to St. Lucia and have been there ever since. Once the doctors moved to St. Lucia they were surprised to find there was no Lutheran Church on the island. From that day their desire and their prayers have been for a Lutheran Church to come to St. Lucia. (Report to the South Atlantic District Mission Board 1991 pg. 14)

Because of changes in staff in Antigua, contact with the group in St. Lucia was not kept up. In 1984 a request came to the Board for Home Missions from former teachers who had served in Antigua at the same time the ^dDoctors were there. These teachers had maintained contact with the doctors and were concerned about the situation. This urging prompted renewed contacts with St. Lucia by the staff serving in Antigua. In 1986, Pastor

Zessin made a number of trips to St. Lucia to bring the Word to the doctors and their families. Because of another change in staff in Antigua, further trips were not made until 1988 when Pastors Henrich and Seeger began making monthly trips to St. Lucia. Worship services and Bible classes were held in the doctors' homes.

In February of 1989 Pastors Henrich and Seeger began meeting with this group in a government school room and the core group began to make contacts with others in St. Lucia that were interested in a Lutheran church. A sizable group was formed which desired to begin a church there in St. Lucia. This desire led to further discussion with the South Atlantic Mission Board and the Board for Home Missions as to future outreach in the Caribbean.

In February of 1990, representatives from Puerto Rico, Antigua, the Board for Home Missions, and the Board for World Missions met in Holiday, Florida, to discuss future outreach for the Caribbean. It was decided to seek the support of "Lift High The Cross" offerings to help conduct an exploratory outreach study of the Caribbean for a period of two years. With the arrival of Pastor David Kehl in Antigua in July of 1990 and also the limited call given to Pastor Wobeck to assist in the study, increased efforts were made to St. Lucia. From September to December of 1990 Pastors Kehl and Henrich flew to St. Lucia three times a month for services and outreach. The remaining weekend was used for outreach to the island of Grenada.

In January 1991 Pastor Matthew Wobeck began to serve in St. Lucia "on location" while Pastors Kehl and Henrich increased visits to Grenada. At that time attendance at

worship services in St. Lucia was around 38 with a high of 46. The group rented its own worhsip space and offered Sunday School and Bible Classes as well as offering Vacation Bible School in one of the villages. A desire for a full-time pastor still existed, however.

Since then, the WELS has provided a full-time pastor in the form of Pastor Joel Jeagar who accepted a call to St. Lucia in summer of 1993. This group continues to be nurtured and grow under his care and he is also able to help with a small core group in Grenada.

Meanwhile, Pastors Henrich and Kehl continue to make trips to Grenada once every three months for services. Here a few families attend services with an average attendance in the teens. One family, the Sylvesters are former members of St. John's Lutheran, Antigua. They have sent their three oldest children to MLS. It is hoped that this core group, with increased attention, will grow as the St. Lucia group has grown.

Trinidad is the next island St. John's is looking to reach out to. The pastors have had contact with a family who they know through their primary school in Antigua. It is hoped that the Guyanese and Indian population is sure to also include some who can identify with the Lutheran Church. Periodic visits have been made with more to come.

St. John's Luthran, Antigua has also begun the Caribbean Christian Training Institute. The purpose of this institute is to help individuals grow in their faith and knowledge of Scripture so they may be equipped for effective Christian ministry. The training programs are to include "training with service" to get the participant involved in ministry instead of just studying about it. Graduation from each level would certify that the individual is prepared for greater lay leadership in the church and community and thus

assist the pastors in outreach efforts. Presently there are two students enrolled in this training institute it is hoped this number will increase in the future.

From this paper I think you can see that the Caribbean Islands are much more than a beautiful vacation spot. It is an area where 30 million people live. These people face the everyday problems and temptations of life. Often, they face these problems and temptations without the aid of the pure gospel. These people need to be reached. As pastor Henrich said in an article in the Northwestern Lutheran:

To those we have been able to reach, we often hear these responses: "We appreciate your stand on the Bible.... I've never had the Scriptures explained so clearly.... Your services are so meaningful." But then comes the question, "Where has the Lutheran church been?" (NWL Feb. 15, 1991 pg. 64)

God willing the WELS will be able to reach out more to this area which seems so ready and eager to be fed by the Word and Sacraments. May the Lord bless our efforts in the Caribbean.

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