

**The conference Adventism and Adventist History :  
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Panel Five: Leadership and Gender

**Presenter:**

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She has taught in her native Barbados at the secondary level and as part of the University of the Southern Caribbean extension summer program –“SDA History for Teachers”

She has taught in Jamaica at Northern Caribbean University (formerly West Indies College)taught a summer in Puerto Rico at Antillean College; and in 1998 she taught philosophy of Christian Education to teachers in Zaoski, Russia. She served Atlantic Union College for over a decade as teacher, facilitator for First year students, advisor to many students, sponsor for Black Christian Union, Division chair and Associate Dean.

She has authored articles for professional journals, eg. North Carolina Historical Review;

She contributed to Women in World History Encyclopedia Vol 2 and also church papers e.g. *Ministry, Journal of Adventist Education* and *Dialogue*. Presented at professional conferences. Association of Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) and NAD teacher’s Convention 2006. 2010.



Adventist History! As we reflect we have celebrated our co-founder, Ellen G. Harmon White, but yet few women have been recognized or celebrated. Also, there is a lack of information and research on non-American personalities, so I am happy to present to you a woman from the Caribbean and also try to fit her into the social and cultural environment of the geographical area and the Adventist church.

## **Irisdeane – The Minister: A Caribbean Leader**

Like many of the other denomination, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time for overseas mission activity. No surprise therefore that Adventism arrived in the British West Indies around the 1880s and women were some of the early converts. Many of the converts were led to the Adventist church through the work of the literature evangelists who have been well heralded as pioneers and documented for their work. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of the young men had gone on to train for the ministry, but women were not encouraged to proceed along this path. The ministers who followed the literature evangelists were well documented.<sup>1</sup> But the Bible instructors, mainly women, were not highlighted, although they were an integral part of getting converts. In 1912, a Barbadian who had gone to the U.S. to explore work opportunities and possible migration, was converted by Elder J. K. Humphrey. He returned to Barbados, and he, his wife Louise and his entire young family joined the fledgling denomination. He probably expected that his son would go into ministry, but it was a daughter, Irisdeane who decided that spreading the gospel would be her life's work. She attended Caribbean Training College to train as a Secretary and Bible Worker. She served not only in her native Barbados but throughout the Caribbean. This paper will argue that although she was designated Bible Instructor and paid as one, she was really an integral part in fulfilling the mission of the church and working like a minister in a time when women were not promoted as leaders.

Her parents had grown up as members of the Church of England, which dominated life in Barbados. However, in their early twenties, they joined the Christian Mission church. This church, indigenous to Barbados was formed in 1890 and went with Barbadians who immigrated to Guyana, Panama and New York.<sup>2</sup> The simplicity of doctrine advocated by the Christian Mission in the island of Barbados may be reduced to the fundamental statement of a belief in the saving power of the blood of Jesus. Few were the rituals and there existed no hierarchy of officers as in the other protestant churches. Moreover the ministers who served the Christian Mission were those who felt called to the ministry. There was nothing strange about this type of leadership, it produced results, converts to the kingdom of God, because the men so called to service were induced with the spirit of service and not out of professionalism.

When Albert Francis returned from the USA he had a new faith, Seventh-day Adventism and he became active in sharing it and in studying the bible and also studying the words of Ellen G. White. By 1920, on Sabbaths he would walk his family and others members six miles to parish of St, James to worship with other believers.<sup>3</sup> All this made an impression on all his

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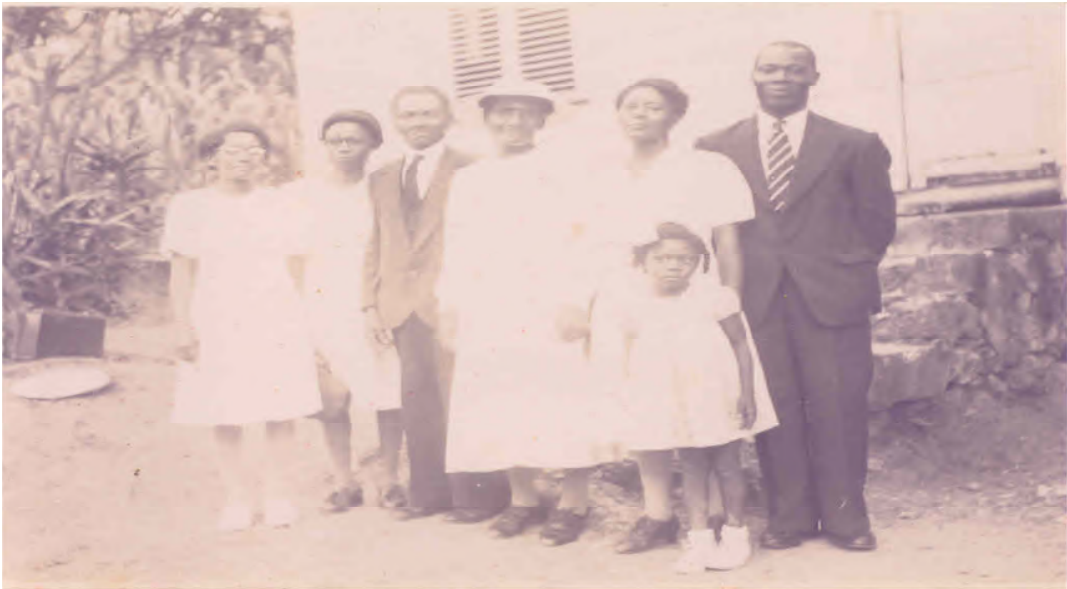
<sup>1</sup> Floyd Greenleaf The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean. Andrews University Press, MI . 1992

Glenn O. Phillips Over a Century of Adventism 1884-1991: Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados Barbados, Caribbean Graphics and Letchworth Ltd. 1991

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Horace Francis, Toronto, Canada, nephew of Irisdeane Francis, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Phillips; Story handed down to children and grandchildren.

children 5 girls and his son. They early saw the importance of service and work. As the children grew no doubt Albert Francis thought that his son would follow him into his tailoring trade or into ministry. His son, Carl Urbane did work as a literature evangelist for a while in many areas of the Caribbean.



Irisdeane 2<sup>nd</sup> from left, her father and mother

But it was his sister, Irisdeane, the fifth child, born October 10, 1911 in Greggs Farm in Hillaby St. Andrew to Albert and Louise Francis who became the church worker. Her name was unique, as one of her older sisters, Geraldine said “name the baby after me”. She was Geraldine St. Clair so her father named the new baby, Irisdeane Clairmonte.<sup>4</sup> She attended the local primary school, Turners Hall and later St. Simon’s Girls. There were no SDA schools on the island at this time, additionally the entrance exams for the secondary school were on Sabbaths. Like some of the other young Adventists young people who wanted a Christian education she took advantage of the opportunity when Caribbean Training College (now University of the Southern Caribbean) was opened in Trinidad in 1927. She attended in 1932 -36 and completed her secondary education and began her college training as a Secretary. She was very good at shorthand, and took many of her notes in shorthand.<sup>5</sup>

It seems that she was baptized in her early 20s and was active in her church.<sup>6</sup> Her faith was strong and she was determined to do what she could to spread the faith working faithfully in her local Hillaby Church. In the 1940’s she was instrumental in starting a church school and also working as assistant Publishing secretary of the Mission. This showed her determination as

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to author from Irisdeane Francis, Jan 24 1994

<sup>5</sup> Many of her notebooks from 1945 have survived and the author is unable to read her beautiful shorthand.

<sup>6</sup> Probably baptized around 1926/27. Author will have to find her baptismal certificate, as she and most of them were members of the few churches in the island.

she worked against the odds and relied on her faith to fulfill what she considered God's commission.

This is the story in her own words of the beginning of the church school at Hillaby.

*"Where there is a church, schools should be established if there are no more than six children to attend. Work as if you were working for your life to save the children from being drowned in the polluting corrupting influence of the world"*

*"We are far behind our duty in this important matter. In many places schools should have been in operation years ago... It is a grievous offense to God that there has been so great neglect in this line" T Vol 6 p. 199-200.*

*When Urbane Francis,(her brother) the then church leader of the Hillaby sda Church read this quotation, it agitated Irisdeane C. Francis' soul, because there were more than six children in the Hillaby Church. She therefore visited the Conference office to be advised on the operation of a church school.*

*Besides being informed of the requisites, she was told that the church should have at least six months teacher's salary in cash, before applying for permission to open a church school. By faith she ordered SDA Educational Readers.*

*She then motivated the church members to initiate a church school fund in order to accumulate the required finance.*

*However, the church members became anxious to employ Mrs Millicent Grant, who was once an elementary second or third year teacher, and had recently accepted the message during O.P. Reid's Evangelistic Campaign, opened the school without the specified cash or permission from the Conference in January 1941.*

*In May, the same year, a doctor suggested that Mrs. Grant should rest. She then requested the church to allow Irisdeane Francis to take care of the school for the period. Instead the Church Board voted that Irisdeane Francis become the teacher until the end of Mrs. Grant maternity leave. Indignant Mrs Grant appealed to the parents asking them to send the children to her home. So many of them sympathized with her, that only six children came to the school when when Ms. Francis took over.*

*With no aid from the church and only six cents a week from each child, she managed the school, supplying its needs, chalk etc, from May 1941 until April 1945, when the Conference called her to be assistant Publishing Secretary to Elder Ramratan .*

*In order that the school should not be closed, the Conference Committee voted to assist by paying the teacher the equal amount of 50% that the church raised each month, however, they would only submit their fifty percent after the church Treasurer reported the cash received by the church. Based on this her sister Minerva and her brother Urbane, managed the school April 1945 – December 1946.*

*The church was then told that the Conference would supply a teacher if the church send in the teacher's six months' salary before the opening of the school in January 1947.*

*Willing to obey the message from the pen of inspiration, Irisdeane activated the church members to accept the challenge and raise the required amount. How? We sold back numbers of Little Friends at one penny each, picture Rolls pictures and solicited funds from willing church members. In spite of all our efforts, we were short of the stipulated sum.*

*On the Friday before the school should be opened, Elder Gackinhemer, the Conference President, at the time, would look at the clock ever time he passed by Miss Francis desk and say so many hours or minutes and you won't get your school open. She would reply, "You will get the amount". How she prayed! Brother Charles George gave her the needed cents but how could she produce the dollars?*

*In answer to her prayers, her sister Mrs. Geraldine Hood entered the Office. Irisdeane requested her to go to Brother C.M. Greenidge's office and request the needed money until Monday. The church would raise it over the weekend. Mrs Hood said " I have that amount here to pay a bill, and you can have it until Monday." With a grateful*

heart, Irisdeane entered the President's office and planted the needed dollars and cents on his desk, saying "I told you, you would get it"...<sup>7</sup> Great faith and determination.

Her first job in the Conference office was to work as Assistant Publishing Secretary, to J.B. Ramratan. She was successful as Ramratan mentioned in a letter to her years later in 1959. He said "

*Well do I recall the happy time we spent there together, building up the Colporteur Ministry. You stood so nobly by my side helping me in every way possible. Those week Rallies in the Churches Sabbath after Sabbath were certainly wonderful, and not to speak of the day's outing we all had together in St. Johns. I really enjoyed my work and association with you, and the Colporteurs there are still near and dear to my heart. The Lord will surely bless your consecrations and whole- hearted devotion to his service"*<sup>8</sup>

Bible workers in the islands – Trinidad St. Kitts to Barbados in 1950s

Irisdeane returned to Caribbean Training College in 1948-49 and took the Bible Instructors course. There she studied with colleagues like G.Ralph Thompson. To help defray expenses she worked in the Broom shop and printing press. According to a minister who worked with her

"The Bible Worker's substantive role was soul-winning. In my time they were mainly women - single women at that. They were the evangelists' "right hands" in soul-winning campaigns; checking on the nightly programs, being eyes and ears for the evangelists at the sites of the meetings, collecting and recording the names of visitors who attended the meeting, visiting those on their lists, and ascertaining their readiness for baptism.

Between crusades, Bible Workers were kept very busy visiting church members, especially the newly baptized, and conducting Bible studies in the homes of non-members. The sick and shut-ins were visited by these "soldiers-of-the-cross".<sup>9</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Written account of the beginning of Hillaby SDA School written by Irisdeane Francis. Cannot ascertain the date she wrote it but it was probably for an anniversary of the school.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from J.B. Ramratan Publishing Secretary South Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to Irisdeane Francis, 9 July 1959.

<sup>9</sup> G. Ralph Thompson, former President of East Caribbean Conference Dec 15, 2013 corroborated by John Josiah Dec 2013. Pastor in Northern section of Barbados 1970-74 when she was his Bible Worker. Now retired

However her first role after was to work in the Caribbean Union office. Before she was engaged in the role for which she was trained. Then she worked in the Leeward Islands, islands stretching from St. Kitts Nevis to Barbados. Sometimes she worked alone when no pastor was available.



Irisdeane in 1940s?



1949



1951



1961

From research it is evident that the time in Barbuda 1955 -58. She did not start the work there but she was able to stabilize it and solidify its growth.<sup>10</sup> Even today Barbuda is not a highly developed island, imagine it in the 1950s. Dominated by the Anglican Church, very few economic activities, it was not an easy place to work for a young single women. In her note book we get an example

*May 12 1955*

*Left Antigua at 5:30 on Captain Jeffreys' boat, good sailing lost sight of Antigua at 9:40 Sailed one hour alongside points, Barbuda. Landed at Palm Beach 11:30. Fishing boat took us to village. Mrs Walker showed me Mrs Hopkins and Mrs Martin. Brother Jack B..., took me to his aunt's home, left luggage there. Slept at Mrs Martin's home. Very hungry...*

*May 14*

*Only brother Jack Hopkins & Thomas came to S.School.*

*May 15 Sunday*

*Sick in the night... Feels flat. Visits with Mrs Brantin. Mr Caleb prepared lamp. Held night meeting. Spoke on Word of God. Gave SDA folks a few garments. All the island flocks. About 30 attends meeting.*

*May 16 Monday*

*Makes an enclosure for bathing.<sup>11</sup>*

However, She worked by building up the Sabbath School , according to the report in the Union paper **Messenger** "Sister Irisdeane Francis, a Bible worker has been very successful in her work in Barbuda, as small island in the territory of the Leeward island Mission where work has just recently started. The Sabbath school membership has risen from seven to thirteen."<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>10</sup> Scantlebury who worked in Barbuda with her as an itinerant preacher from Barbados, date of talk.

<sup>11</sup> Notes from surviving note book of Irisdeane Francis

<sup>12</sup> *Messenger* May 1956 p. 10

article ended by encouraging members and leaders to take note of the accomplishment and emulate the good example.<sup>13</sup>



She had to lead the church when ministers were absent, hence her nickname among the relatives “The Minister”.



She moved between the islands of St. Kitts, Nevis and of Antigua and Barbuda, the journey between Antigua and Barbuda is a 20 minute flight, or 3 hours by boat. While in Antigua she started a church, not just people but an actual structure and by her living and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

example was able to introduce members to vegetarianism.<sup>14</sup> Since there were no parsonages she like other workers had to find lodgings where they could usually with church members.

In Antigua she stayed with a Mr & Mrs William Josiah of Old Road and also with a Mr & Mrs Maurice Pryce.<sup>15</sup> One person remember her as always wearing long sleeved light colored dresses, and was serious ( at least to him as a kid) She was always eager to give Bible Studies or to talk about the Bible.<sup>16</sup> Her influence was extensive and great and families decided to name their children after her.



Irisdeane Samuels and Irisdeane Francis

She continued to help raise up schools and churches using all the skills she developed in her various roles. Travelling between the island on small planes and visiting the sick, shut ins and proiding needed pastoral support and leadership. She was instrumental in building churches, for example she helped build a church in Cedar Grove Antigua.

She has notes of the dedication service of this church in one of her notebooks.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Pastor John Josiah, retired minister in St. Croix who had Francis as his bible worker in many crusades

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Dr.Melvin Peters, Professor Department of Religion Duke Univeristy. Reflections on Irisdeane Francis when he was a young boy in high school in Antigua. November 23, 2013.





She kept notes and wrote notes on many sermons. Many of her notebooks have survived, and her shorthand is not decipherable by this author.

She returned to Barbados and spent the rest of her time working there. She was active in working with many of the pastors and raising up churches or increasing membership. Now she was more stable she stayed with family and then on her own, and she bought herself a car – a Morris Minor- it was her faithful carrier. One reason she got a car was that she would not have to depend on transportation home, with the ministers, especially if their wives were not in attendance.

“The Morris Minor that Sis. Francis drove was always pleasant to the eyes; shiny on the outside and neatly packed away on the inside.” I just could not understand how she would change a set of tires after running the car for three years... I eventually solved the puzzle when I considered the condition of the roads on both islands in the 60's, how light the Morris Minor was, how fast or, more correctly how slowly she drove and how 'heavy' she must have been.”<sup>17</sup>



Irisdeane Francis next to her Morris Minor

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<sup>17</sup> John Josiah

Her impact as a Bible worker and leader was explained by one pastor with whom she worked, and this sentiment was echoed by other. Pastor John Josiah, who served the Northern section of Barbados in 1970-74, said he

“was privileged to have Sis. Francis as *my Bible Worker* (as she was respectfully referred to) in crusades held at Grape Hall, Connell Town, Pie Corner and Chance Hall. Sis. Francis was versed in the scriptures - Genesis to Revelation.

Working in crusades with Sis. Francis was for me a learning experience. She was never far removed from the platform. When I stood to preach the gospel nightly, her seat was at the back of the stage towards the end where she could glance at the audience during the meeting. She helped me with a Bible reference whenever there was a need. What a blessed relief that was to me on occasions! I am forever grateful.”<sup>18</sup>

However, she had special interest in the areas dealing with the SANCTUARY. Her charts and other visual aids, many of them of her own creation, told the story. She was also very good at telling the children's Bible story with her many visual aids. Many that she created herself.



Pastor G. Ralph Thompson also confirmed that she was a very spiritual person, did not put on airs, very well respected and lived her Christianity.

From discussions J. Josiah had with Sis. Francis,

“she enjoyed working with one of the Nembhard brothers in Barbados. These Pastors were successful soul-winners of their time. They came from Jamaica and served with distinction in the Caribbean Union. I am well aware that Sis. Francis teamed up with the late Pastor Clarence Lashley in Barbados. Little wonder that Pastor Lashley was a consistent centurion. His hard work coupled with the dedication of the Bible Worker bore much fruit.”<sup>19</sup>

As speaker she was clear and forthright in presenting the word. This was recognized by the ladies with whom she worked. In 1965 the ladies of the East Caribbean conference decided

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

that they wanted “to hold an effort and we would like to have a tent in which to conduct it”. They wanted to hold it for five nights a week and for six weeks. Sunday – Wednesday and Friday nights. They decided that Irisdeane Francis would speak for the four night and Pastor G. R. Thompson who was the President at the time would speak on Sunday nights. So began “The Better Life Crusade” at Ellerslie, Black Rock, St. Michael March 28, 1965 and faithfully for 6 week, Irisdeane spoke.<sup>20</sup> Currently the site of one of the largest churches in island .



Irisdeane Francis speaking in the Black Rock church that was built on site of Crusade in 1965

Her leadership skills were also exhibited when she decided to act. When the conference stopped supplying Morning Watch Calendars, she prepared and printed at her own expense over 300 copies so give to people that she had been in the habit of sending in place of Christmas cards.<sup>21</sup>

Her visitation of seniors in Nursing homes and senior homes led her to another innovation. Her concern for the senior of the church lead her to put her voice and influence to help them get a home run by Adventist where their concerns of healthy living and Sabbath

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<sup>20</sup> G. Ralph Thompson, interview Dec 16, 2013; **Messenger** October 1965 “ Something New in Public Evangelism”G.Ralph Thompson p. 3 **Ministry** “A New Venture in Evangelism” September 1965 p. 13

<sup>21</sup> Elna A. Gay, niece of Irisdeane Francis Feb 16, 2013

keeping would not be a concern. The Conference office had been at this address for Cr. Brittons Hill, and had moved to a larger area and the old building was sitting there at the corner of a residential area. From her visits and speaking with senior she visited in nursing homes she knew their concerns. She prayed, pleaded and proposed that the site be used as an Adventist senior citizens home. After much sweat her wish was granted and she was made the supervisor of the Seventh-day Adventist Senior Citizen's Home .

From this short presentation it is evident that Irisdeane Francis left a large legacy of faith, service and sacrifice. Many are the stories of her helping young people to stay firm and devote their life to service and to the work of the church as their serve God. According to her niece Elna her letters ended with an exhortation to look for the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming.

Others report stories of how she helped them in their spiritual life. Throughout the entire Eastern Caribbean she has left her mark. Her final act of service for the church was donating the family plot for the building of the new Hillaby SDA Church.



Groundbreaking for the new Hillaby Church



The site of new Hillaby SDA church, a monument to Irisdeane Francis and her dedication to God's work

However the resources are scarce. She has left many notebooks but without the context it is difficult to understand them all. I am still working on them. In all the books on the history on Latin America Caribbean she is not mentioned. The service records only state her years but did not give the island on which she worked. Other difficulties include the following:

- i. Bible Workers/Instructors not highly regarded in the church – Mainly single women;



Newly dedicated Hillaby SDA Church on the former property of Albert Francis and his daughter Irisdeane Francis

- ii. Record of years of service does not list island, just the conference
- iii. Did not keep accurate records of the persons that they worked with to bring to baptism – Ministers given all the credit, although they would thank the Bible worker for contribution

As a result of this research the administrations at all levels need to encourage more accurate record keeping. Also to recognize and elevate role of other workers along with the minister

A major player in developing the work in the Caribbean, Irisdeane Clairmonte Francis should be remembered for her work in establishing churches, working with hundreds for baptism, supporting and starting church schools, and establishing a senior citizen home for older Adventist.

Thank you

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