

“May the Wind Blow Again”
A Historical Account of the Beginning of the Church of God
in the Western Caribbean/Central America/Honduras

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This paper is a summary of a historical account of the first Church of God planted in the Western Caribbean and Central America or Central America’s Caribbean Coast¹- the Utila Church of God.

The following abridged account of the early beginnings of the Church of God-Cleveland, Tennessee, in the Western Caribbean and Central America, has been compiled and written based on historical records from the Church of God World Missions as provided by the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, Tennessee, the “Until All Have Heard” publication of the COG World Missions; Dr. Charles Conn’s Where the Saints Have Trod; personal journal entries of COG Missionaries Rev. Fred and Lucille Litton, Rev. Norva E. and Anne Skaggs, Sis. Frances Arch; and interviews from surviving members of the first Church of God church to be planted in the Western Caribbean, the Utila Church of God, and/or their children. Note the focus of this historical account is on the region of Central America and the Western Caribbean; not Latin America in its entirety.

How and Why Utila?

The first Church of God to be **planted** in the Western Caribbean and Central America was an English-speaking church planted by Church of God Missionaries from Los Angeles, California, Fred and Lucille Litton, in 1944 on the island of Utila, Bay Islands.² Utila is located approximately 21 miles off the eastern Coast of Honduras. The Bay Islands, along with the Southeastern coast of Honduras, also known as “La Mosquitia”, are former British Colonies, and as such their culture and language are more aligned with their neighbors in the Cayman Islands and other Caribbean islands.³

¹ Central America’s Caribbean Coast is home to many native English Speaking Communities and is quickly becoming known as the CACOA Region.

² De Gruyter Brill’s Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online credits Fred and Lucille Litton for planting the first Church of God, Cleveland, TN in Honduras in 1944. <https://referenceworks.brill.com/search?q=Honduras&source=%2Fdb%2Fegpo>.

³ The Bay Islands, La Mosquitia, Belize and the Cayman Islands were all subjects of the British Crown and were governed by the same British Governor whose headquarters were in the Cayman Islands. The Bay Islands and La Mosquitia flourished under British rule until the late 1800s, early 1900s when Great Britain gave them over to Spanish-speaking Honduras. The people of the Bay Islands did not begin to properly learn Spanish until the 1960s. Those born before the mid 1950s, generally do not speak or read Spanish.

The Littons first felt the call to be missionaries and take the message of holiness and the power of Pentecost during a Church of God revival in Los Angeles in 1936. They felt the Lord leading them to the Hawaiian Islands, and in 1937, set sail for Honolulu. In Hawaii, they led a revival that went on for 27 months resulting in numerous churches being planted and a strong and healthy field for the power of Pentecost to thrive. Six years after first arriving in Hawaii, they then felt the Holy Spirit leading them to Central America and the Western Caribbean.

In late 1943, a minister from Jamaica by the name of Robert Shaw informed the Assistant Overseer of Church of God World Missions in Guatemala, Phinehas D. Hoggatt, of the need for a holiness church in the country of Belize⁴, which at that time was named British Honduras and the capital city⁵ was called Belize. Rev. Hoggatt asked Fred and Lucille Litton, who had recently arrived in El Salvador to assist H.S. Syverson, to go to Belize. They responded to the request and set out on a nautical journey to Belize at the end of November of 1943.

The Littons expected to arrive in Belize safely and begin missionary work right away.⁶ However, a storm with fierce winds caused the boat to veer off course and seek shelter in the harbor of Utila island, the smallest of the three Bay Islands which are located off the coast of Honduras.

The Littons did not let the interruption of their travels prevent them from doing what they were called to do - lead the lost to Christ. Upon arriving in Utila they approached Bro. James Cooper⁷ of the Utila United Methodist Church⁸ and collaborated with him to hold evangelistic meetings in the church building. Their meetings proved to be fruitful as many were being drawn to the holiness and Pentecostal message they preached. The meetings steadily grew in attendance and was proving to be a promising multi-month revival until they were forced to stop meeting in the Utila Methodist Church after two months. When the Littons arrived on Utila, Bro. James Cooper was serving as the Society Stewart and was in charge of the Utila Methodist Church while his older brother, Rev. Fred Cooper, the circuit preacher, preached in Methodist Churches on the island of Roatan. News of the Pentecostal Revival on Utila reached Rev. Fred Cooper while in Roatan and he returned to Utila in February of 1944 with the purpose of stopping it. We know now that his actions only temporarily halted the Revival, it did not stop it. By this time, the Pentecostal versus Methodist approach to worship was causing rifts in families, and even caused some husbands and wives to attend different churches.⁹ Consequently, the Littons decided to resume their journey to Belize and arrived there at the end of March of 1944.

The Littons ministered in Belize for about six months before departing for the Bay Islands in September 1944. They even sent at least one missionary report that they were having good attendance in Belize

⁴ Conn, Charles W. Where the Saints Have Trod: A History of the Church of God Missions. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1959.

⁵ The capital city of Belize is currently called Belmopan.

⁶ Oral history recounts from the Ponce, Thompson, Cooper, and Bush families. Interviews by C.R. Cooper, Nov-Dec 2023.

⁷ James and his wife Lillian, would serve as the first local pastors of the Utila Church of God in 1946 while the Littons traveled. They would serve in this position, filling in for the Littons, until Rev. Norva and Anne Skaggs arrived in 1951.

⁸ The Mitzpah United Methodist Church was the first Christian church on the island of Utila, founded in 1873.

⁹ Oral history recounts from the Hinds, Brown, and Bush families. Interviews by C.R. Cooper, December 2023.

at night meetings but were making plans to return to the Bay Islands of Honduras as soon as possible.¹⁰ Later they would share that they struggled to feel like they were supposed to be in Belize since they did not see or feel the success they had experienced in Utila.¹¹ They won 14 converts to the Lord while in Belize and attempted to start a church with them, but with the exception of having children for Sunday School, the ministry did not have the start they expected. Rev. Shaw stayed in Belize after the Littons departed to continue missionary work until Bessie D. Hargrave, a Church of God Missionary, arrived in 1945. Hargrave sent reports back to the World Missions Department that what was left on Belize could not be called a “mission or a church”. In one account from 1945, Hargrave reported that the work in Belize was struggling¹² with a mere 8 members attending. He, Hargrave, would later be credited with growing the work and establishing it as a viable church in 1946.¹³

Submitting to the direction of the Holy Spirit, in September of 1944, the Littons charted a course back to Utila and embarked on a journey that included stops on the island of Roatan as well as the Honduran coastal city of La Ceiba. They initially anticipated a successful stop in Roatan as they had been told they would find two empty churches which they hoped to revive and bring into the Church of God. However, journal statements revealed that although some of the Roatan people were willing to attend revival services, they were not ready or willing to be a part of an organized church.¹⁴ Therefore, they continued the route back to Utila, arriving in November 1944. Later on, in a sermon from the pulpit of the Utila Church of God, Rev. Fred Litton would say “we now know that it was not a storm that brought us to Utila [in 1943], but it was the wind of the Holy Ghost”.¹⁵ Indeed, it was the wind of the Holy Ghost that directed them to where they should plant and build this first Church of God in the region.

In November 1944, upon their return to Utila, the Littons reconnected with the converts of their visit in November 1943 - February 1944 to begin the church on Utila. They worked with approximately 40 to 60 of the converts from 1943 to establish the first Church of God congregation, which to this day is known as the Utila Church of God. They immediately held another revival which went on for almost two months through the first part of January 1945, having both open air meetings and meetings in available spaces. During this extended revival, they saw almost 600 people get saved and many baptized in the Holy Ghost. There exist multiple lists of groups of 40 or 50 converts being baptized in water on a weekly basis.¹⁶ It is important to note that, between 1944 and 1945, the population of Utila was roughly 1,400-1,500¹⁷ so they saw close to half the island come to the knowledge and saving grace of Jesus Christ with the power and might of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ Church of God *Evangel*, October 7, 1944.

¹¹ Oral history recounts from Ponce, Brown and Eden families. Interviews by C.R. Cooper, January- February 2024.

¹² Conn, Charles. *Where the Saints Have Trod*.

¹³ Conn, Charles. *Where the Saints Have Trod*.

¹⁴ Littons’ personal writings.

¹⁵ The names “Holy Ghost” and “Holy Spirit” are used interchangeably for the third person of the Godhead Trinity throughout this document because although present COG vernacular in the USA prefers the use of “Holy Spirit”, COG Missionaries to the Caribbean and other English-speaking areas from the early 1900s through the 1980s used “Holy Ghost”. Moreover, current vernacular in the Caribbean still prefers the use of “Holy Ghost” to “Holy Spirit”.

¹⁶ Original lists and copies of them are in the possession of the clerk of the Utila Church of God.

¹⁷ Today, Utila's population is approximately 12,000 people.

The 1944-45 Holy Ghost revival was so powerful and encompassing that it caused the annual Christmas and Watchnight (New Year's eve 1945) dances to be cancelled, and it temporarily closed Utila's only liquor store, the "Estanco".¹⁸ In early January 1945, the Littons began looking for a building for the church. The members and new converts raised over \$1,500 dollars and with a \$1,500 donation from Church of God World Missions, in April 1945, the Littons purchased the building that was being used for Utila's only movie theatre, casino, and dancehall called the "Silver Slipper" for \$3,000.¹⁹ On April 30, 1945 the Utila Church of God held its first service in the building and in the same year, Church of God Headquarters in Cleveland, TN commissioned the Littons as the first pastors of the Utila Church of God, recognizing it as an established congregation no longer in "mission/church plant" status.²⁰

Not stopping their momentum, in 1945, the Littons reached out to the leadership of then Lee College (now Lee University), to set up a school in Utila. Between 1946 and 1948, the school, named the Lee School of Utila, was organized and accredited.²¹ The Lee School was the first English private/parochial school in the Bay Islands. With the help of visiting and retired faculty and instructors from Lee College, the school prospered and grew in influence until it was forced to shut down by an oppressive Honduran government in the 1960s because its curriculum was only taught in English. After a few restarts proved to be unsuccessful, the school was permanently shut down by the late 1970s; but the Utila Church of God and many supporters continue to hope that it will one day be reopened.

The Littons left Utila officially in 1951 at the direction of Overseer P.D. Hoggat to plant more churches in other parts of Central America, beginning in Costa Rica.

First COG Planted in the Region but NOT the OLDEST

The Utila Church of God was the first Church of God to be planted, meaning birthed in the movement and its doctrine, but it is not the oldest Church of God in the region²². The reason for this is because there were other churches that had been brought into the Church of God through the process of amalgamation before 1944. Amalgamation is the process used to allow independent churches or those planted or founded under other denominations or doctrines to join the Church of God. In most cases, the amalgamated church adopts and fully adheres to the Church of God doctrine as written in the Declaration of Faith, Doctrinal and Practical Commitments, Doctrines, Policies, Resolutions, Mission and Vision²³. In some cases, some amalgamated churches join as affiliates and retain some of their founding principles or organizational structure while identifying as Church of God.

¹⁸ It was reported and passed on in verbal history that the proprietors of the local liquor store were so angry at the Littons that they petitioned the Office of the Mayor of Utila to stop the revival so they could get back some of their customers.

¹⁹ A copy of the receipt of the moneys raised and building purchased is in the possession of the Clerk of the Utila Church of God.

²⁰ Conn, Charles, *Where the Angels Have Trod*.

²¹ Personal notes of the Littons AND interviews with Anne Skaggs, February 2024.

²² Note the focus of this historical account is on the region of Central America and the Western Caribbean; not Latin America in its entirety.

²³ The Church of God, "Beliefs", <https://churchofgod.org/beliefs/church-of-god-is/>.

The oldest Church of God in Central America is in Tontonicapán, Guatemala. This church was founded by Charles Truman Furman in 1932²⁴ under the auspices of the Primitive Methodists. Mr. Furman began his missionary work to Guatemala between 1916 -1919, first under the Pennsylvania United Free Missionary Society and then joined with others who had previously planted Pentecostal churches there as either independent Pentecostals or under the Plymouth Brethren organization. Mr. Furman went back to Guatemala in 1929 with his wife under the Primitive Methodist Organization. After experiencing a mighty Pentecostal revival that resulted in the growth of 14 churches, they left the Primitive Methodists and amalgamated all 14 churches to the Church of God in 1934. In that same year, the Church of God World Missions Board named Mr. Furman the General Overseer for the Guatemala Mission (the Churches that he brought into the movement) and he served in that position until he died in 1947.²⁵

Two English speaking churches in Central America also joined the Church of God before the church in Utila was planted. In 1935, J.H. Ingram amalgamated a congregation in Puerto Limon, Costa Rica which was pastored by Sister Rosabelle Dandie²⁶, a Salvation Army minister of Jamaican descent.²⁷ It would be the only Church of God in Costa Rica for 15 years before one would be planted. In 1940, J.N. Cumberbatch amalgamated a church that was founded by A.J. Anguick, a U.S. Armed Serviceman at the time, on the Caribbean coast of Panama.²⁸ A year later, a Spanish-speaking church on the opposite side of the country, in Panama City, led by Bolívar de Sousa²⁹, came into fellowship.³⁰ The Church of God work in Panama would grow over the next few years through amalgamations.³¹ There is no current information on whether these churches or successor ministries are still in existence.³²

Also, in 1940, H.S. Syverson, a teacher and minister of music appointed by the World Missions Board, was sent to serve as the Overseer for El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Panama. Upon arrival, he unified Church of God mission efforts with an independent Pentecostal Missionary from Canada named Frederick W. Mebius who had been in the country since the late 1800s. Together they began to work on what Charles Conn would refer to as “an unpromising beginning” of the Church of God in the Central American country of El Salvador.³³ Syverson would eventually succeed in building a Bible School in El Salvador, but the early missions he supervised were based on the amalgamated missions of F.W. Mebius and their joint endeavors.

²⁴ Furman, Charles Truman. *Guatemala and the Story of Chuze*. Cleveland, TN: Church of God Pub. House, 1940.

²⁵ Conn, Charles, *Where the Saints Have Trod*.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ Results of Research Request submitted to the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center (PRC) and provided on January 26, 2024. Dixon PRC, 260 11th Street NE, Cleveland TN 37311. January 2024.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ Conn, Charles, *Where the Saints Have Trod*.

³⁰ “Until All Have Heard”, Church of God, World Missions.

³¹ Research Request Results from Dixon PRC.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ Conn, *Where the Saints Have Trod*.

Furthermore, there is currently no written information indicating that any Spanish-speaking Churches of God were planted in Central America until 1951³⁴, when Josue and Venette-Diamond Rubio, planted the first Spanish-speaking Church of God in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.³⁵ As a result, the current belief is that the Rubio's church plant was the FIRST Spanish-speaking Church of God in Central America.³⁶

Utila Church of God AFTER the Littons

In 1946, the Littons began to travel throughout Honduras and Central America holding revivals and looking for fertile soil to plant additional churches. A few ministers served as pastors during the interim until Rev. Norva and Anne Skaggs arrived and served as Overseers. In 1946, **Rev. James and Lillian Cooper** would become the first locals to step in the role of Pastors of the Utila Church of God after **Rev. Graham and Marth Stiliwell**, Missionaries from the U.S., served a brief assignment as temporary pastors. Direct descendants of the Coopers will attend the 80th Anniversary in Utila.

Rev. O'Neil and Ineze McCullough, were sent by Lee College to organize and be the principals of the Lee School in Utila in 1948. Teachers by gifting and training, together with Rev. O'Neil's sister, Eva McCullough, they were credited with establishing one of the most effective discipleship programs on the Bay Islands. They are fondly remembered as the ones who taught the islanders what it meant to operate in the power of Pentecost and what it meant to live a Spirit-filled life ("a life led by the Holy Ghost").

Rev. Josue and Venette (nee Diamond) Rubio. In 1946, Venette Diamond, a native of the Utila Cays, escorted by her uncle, traveled to the United States with the help of the Littons and Missions Overseer Vessie D. Hargraves, to attend the International Preparatory Institute (IPI) in San Antonio, Texas. There she met Josue Rubio, a minister of music who was working as an instructor at the IPI. Josue Rubio, a COG Missionary originally from Sinaloa, Mexico, had gotten saved years before at a Church of God revival in Baja California, Mexico. The family is fond of recounting the story of how Josue, who only spoke Spanish, courted and soon after married, Venette who only spoke English. In 1948, at the invitation of the Littons, the Rubios traveled to Utila and preached a powerful revival at the Utila Church of God. With the help of mission offerings from the Utila Church of God and support from Cleveland and Church of God World Missions, the Rubios answered the call to plant the first Spanish speaking Church of God in Honduras, in the capital city of Tegucigalpa in 1951. With their one-year old child, Joshua Jr, in tow, they faced numerous difficulties as the priests and members from the local Catholic churches caused many to rise up against and threaten them because of the holiness and Pentecostal message they preached. They can also be recognized as the first to PLANT a Spanish-speaking Church of God in Central America because historical accounts indicate that the other Spanish-speaking Churches of God in the region were pre-existing churches that amalgamated to the organization.

³⁴ The Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online credits Josue and Venette Rubio for planting the first Spanish-Speaking Church of God, Cleveland, TN in Honduras in 1951.

<https://referenceworks.brill.com/search?q=Honduras&source=%2Fdb%2Fegpo>.

³⁵ Research Request Results from Dixon PRC.

³⁶ Additional research is needed to determine if the Rubio's planted the first Spanish-speaking Church of God in Central America.

Rev. Norva and Anne Skaggs, also of California, were sent to Utila to aid the Littons as teachers of the Lee School in 1952. **The Skaggs are trailblazers because a majority of the Church of God's expansion in Honduras was under their leadership.** They served as the Overseers for Honduras as Utila had been established as the Headquarters in the Region. They planted the first Churches of God on the Utila Cays, on the island of Roatan - the French Cay Church of God, as well as in cities of La Ceiba, Tegucigalpa, and San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Sis Anne Skaggs is still alive and travels to Bay Islands to minister even now in her 90s.

Sis. Frances Bailey Evans Arch, also from California, began her missionary work in Belize in 1952, but by 1953 joined the Skaggs on the island of Utila. She is a trailblazer because she embarked on this journey as a young, widowed mother with a young child, ready to work in the mission field. Her work and dedication at the Utila Church of God and the Lee School allowed the Skaggs to expand the work of the Church of God as they were able to travel to other parts of the English territories knowing that Utila was in good hands. Sis Frances would later marry a man from the Bay Islands, Seth Arch, and together they grew the Church of God on French Cay, Roatan. In total, Sis Arch pastored churches in the Bay Islands for 50 years. Sis Arch just recently went on to be with the Lord in October of 2023.

There are number of other missionaries who served in various roles at the Utila Church of God between the late 1950s to the 1960s:

- *Missionary Mabel Mullins served as a teacher and assistant to Sis. Frances Arch;*
- *Rev. Doile A. King, a Missionary from the state of Georgia, married a local Utilian named Liberty while serving as Pastor and Principal of the Lee School;*
- *Missionary Sis. Ollie Harris served as Pastor;*
- *Rev. Henry Dilbert, a native of Roatan, served as temporary Pastor;*
- *Rev. and Mrs. Clyde Hargrave served as Principal of the Lee School and temporary Pastor;*
- *Rev. Paul and Bedie Garmon served as Pastors*
- *Sis. Lucille McCutchen served as a teacher at the Lee School*
- *Rev. and Mrs. Theodore Farabee served as Pastors, as well as Principal and Teacher of the Lee School;*
- **Rev. James and Carabelle Pendrey**, Missionaries from Florida and Georgia, served in Utila from 1968 through 1972. They are regarded as Trailblazers because the Utila Church of God grew to its greatest level of membership under them. They mobilized the local church and community to rebuild the church building with a concrete foundation and constructed a parsonage. Concrete foundations were not used on the islands at that time, so this was the first of a kind. To date (2020s), the Pendreys are regarded as the most beloved of the missionaries because they focused on the youth. The Utila Church of God is still in existence today because the "youth" that were saved and disciplined under the Pendreys remain faithful in service to the Lord.