

First Missions – Caribbean

First Missions – Pioneering Workers – Caribbean

Suriname

Rev January 29, 2024

SURINAME

Originally a Dutch Colony called *Dutch Guiana*, in 1954, Suriname became one of the constituent countries of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. On November 25, 1975, it became an independent state.

It is the smallest sovereign state in South America at just under 165,000 square kilometers (64,000 square miles). It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the north, French Guiana to the east, Guyana to the west, and Brazil to the south.

It has a population of approximately 612,985 and is dominated by descendants from the slaves and labourers brought in from Africa and Asia by the Dutch Empire and Republic. Most of the people live by the country's (north) coast, in and around its capital and largest city, Paramaribo. Situated slightly north of the equator, Suriname is a tropical country dominated by rainforests. Suriname's economy is heavily dependent on its abundant natural resources, namely bauxite, gold, petroleum, and agricultural products.

[View Photos in TTT Photo Gallery.](#)

When did the workers first arrive? Sister Workers Minnie Collen (from NY) and Mien Wijchers (from Netherlands) in 1947

Brothers (from Holland): Lester VanDenBerg and Anne Bakker on October 4, 1950, from Netherlands

Who was the first to profess?

Who was the first native to go in the work?

When & Where was the first meeting?

When & Where was the first baptism?

When & Where was the first convention? at Zondag on Bardan's property for over 50 years

Where have subsequent conventions been held?

Where is the convention currently held?

Who have the Overseers been?

Additional or corrected information on this country will be very welcome.

Paramaribo, Suriname, South America

November 6-9, 2019

Goedemorgen familie en vrienden,
(Good morning family and friends),

As the plane drops beneath the towering cumulus cloud, an endless an Anaconda-like serpentine river, emerges from below dissecting a jungle so dense, I'm nearly certain, if our plane crashes, the jungle would swallow us whole and we'd never be seen again! But then the plane banks hard to the left and a brief glimpse of distant Paramaribo, the Capitol city of Suriname, beckons us forward.

[photo]

Waiting in the airport with a very warm welcome was Dan Henry who has been laboring here for the last 5 years. He said to me, "Usually we save the best 'til last. But that doesn't hold true this time. You get to start the Caribbean conventions here in Suriname!"

For one year now, ever since I first received a hearty invitation to visit the former Dutch colony of Suriname, a reoccurring wave of nostalgia has been sweeping over me and getting stronger these past few months and weeks, then days and now this very moment. As the plane landed, I felt like I'm awakening from an unfolding dream wondering if this is actually happening! I am following in the footprints of my father. You see, nearly 7 decades ago, my father **Lester VanDenBerg and his companion Anne Bakker were the first Brother Workers to come and labor in this country.** Together they arrived by ship from Holland on October 4th, 1950.

[\[Photo of Lester VanDenBerg and Anne Bakker\]](#)

As boys growing up at home, our father would fondly speak to us of his fascinating experiences in this tropical land, that, to us, seemed so far, far away. Suriname is the smallest country in South America. It was formerly a colony of the Netherlands known as Dutch Guiana. Today it's population of only 558,000 is tiny compared to its land mass. 80% of the country is virgin rainforest and the Surinamese claim that 10 % of all the freshwater rivers in the world flow here.

Now 69 years later I am not just studiously peering at old black and white photos, but actually putting names to faces and places that Dad told us about; and even more so, hearing the voices of the two remaining, Surinamese Friends that knew my father: dear Paul Bardan (89) and Hetty Tammenga, now 87.

Dear old Paul had a wishful dream that before he passed away, he and Hetty could somehow meet the youngest son of the man that they first heard the Gospel through nearly 70 years prior. One year ago, Paul told his family and the Workers of his wish. Someone who cared, told somebody else who cared, and they in turn, told others who cared, and somehow today I am in their home. I can't put into words the feelings that welled up inside as Dan H. and his companion Bart Hartemink ushered me into the Bardan's quiet home.

Seeing we arrived so late from the airport, and they being quite elderly, they had long retired for the night, so I didn't expect to see them until the morning. Nonetheless they awakened and climbed out of bed and stood there smiling in their pajamas. When they saw me, they clapped their hands then embraced me with both tears flowing and laughter resonating. I was speechless. Surely they must think I am someone else! Then it came clear to me, they love me because they loved my Father. In a small measure I felt this must've been the feeling the Son of God had when people loved him because of their great love for his Heavenly Father.

In the early 50's, Paul attended a few of my father and Anna Bakker's meetings as a young man still living at home. At the end of 1953 my Dad left Suriname and returned to the USA. But before he left, he looked up Paul, brought a Dutch Hymnbook and gave it to him. Years later, Paul married and with his wife Ursi and their young children, they were invited by Ursi's aunt to the Gospel Meetings the Sister Workers were holding in the city Paramaribo.

When Paul sat down, he was handed a Dutch Hymnbook and recognized it was the same type of Hymnbook that my father had given to him 19 years earlier. During the Sister's meetings Paul and Ursi made up their minds and settled it in their hearts to follow the Lord Jesus through simple faith in his Truth and Way. Their faith never wavered and today it is stronger than ever.

[Photo of Paul and Ursi Bardan]

Hetty Tammenga was 17 when she professed in Dad and Anna's earliest mission meetings in Paramaribo. For many years she was the only one in her family that accepted the Gospel message. She initially feared being put out of the home by her strict 7th Day Adventist parents as a result. Young Hetty fretted about this and went out to pray in the yard behind her parent's home. She was worrying about going to the Brother Worker's Gospel meetings. It was while she was praying that she heard a voice so clearly telling her, "Go and I will be with you."

She rushed to Lester and Anna's Gospel meeting and arrived 5 minutes late. To her surprise when she rushed in the school room the Brothers were still standing at the door. The meeting had not yet started. My Father told her, "Hetty, we were waiting for you." After the Gospel meeting, she returned home and found her parents on their knees praying, and they didn't hinder her after that – even though if that were to happen, she had made a plan to go and stay with an older Dutch lady who had already professed, Moesje Van Dorn. Many years later Hetty's younger Sister Margo also professed and then her own daughter Sharrie also. Now she lives with Margo in Paramaribo. Today she embraced me saying, "Ve haf zee zame fader. Lester is your fader en zee flesh, and he is mijn fader en zee Evangelie (Gospel)."

[Photo of John VanDenBerg with Hettie Tammenga]

Hettie was only 17 when she made her noble choice, along with many others seen in this 1950 photo of the first church in Suriname. She is the young lady standing behind (and between) Anne Bakker and my father. Now at 86 years, she is the only one left living of that original group of friends.

[Photo of 1950 first church in Suriname]

Minnie Collen from New York (Irving Ross's aunt) and Mien Wijchers from the Netherlands were the first workers to labor in Suriname. They arrived about 1947. Later Frieda Faber and Gertrude Ruyter both from Iowa and both of Dutch background labored with Minnie. A lady from Suriname, Mrs. Coehlo, had professed in Indonesia before WWII and had now returned to Suriname to live after the war. Later Minnie Collen returned to Suriname and another group professed in about 1962 and were baptized together in 1967 when Piet Doume, the older Brother in Holland visited here. Most of this group lived south of Paramaribo in the Lelydorp area.

Anne Bakker met Lize Pengel while inviting people, house to house, in Paramaribo in May 1951. They were married April 18, 1953. Both became teachers and Anne became a highly regarded headmaster who wrote a grammar book that was used for many years in Suriname. A school is named after him. Anne was faithful to the Truth. He and my father never saw each other again but wrote faithfully to one and another for many decades until Anne passed away.

In a few hours the Friends will arrive, and we'll begin the 49th or 50th (Paul wasn't quite sure) convention here in their carport. If you hurry, you can possibly make it! They will heartily welcome you as they have me!

[Photo of Bardans in front of their home/carport where convention was held]

With a handshake in thought,

John/Johannes

Suriname, South America
Zondag, November 10, 2019

Goede nacht familie en vrienden,
 (Good night family and friends)

Over 50 years ago, Paul and Ursi Bardan acquired their property and began clearing the dense jungle to make room to build their small home and raise a large family of 8 children. Riding his bicycle to work here, he rounded the corner and there in the middle of his driveway were two Jaguars. Fortunately for Paul, they were sound asleep, and he managed to escape!

Still today, the jungle is close enough to hear the Howler monkeys very early every morning. When the dominant males "whoop it up," their calls can be heard 2 miles/3 km away. Needless to say, the convention location is void of human interference, noise, traffic, etc.

This afternoon concluded two wonderful convention days at Bardan's home where everyone felt so welcome. Although our Friends were small in number, still they are large in heart, and I surely felt close to each of them. They will long be remembered by me.

[Photo of convention attendees in front of Bardan's home/carport]

Suriname Convention, 2019

left to right:

Marsha Kiser from Missouri, USA, but laboring in Ecuador.

Rosanne Colvin from Saskatchewan, Canada, but laboring in W. Africa.

Ermita Warner of Trinidad, labored 42 years in East Africa, but now in the Caribbean.

Rosemarie Soerjabin from Suriname, but laboring in Haiti.

Bart Hartemink. from New Zealand but now laboring in Suriname.

Dan Henry from Iowa, USA but now laboring in Suriname.

Hansruedi Fehr from Switzerland, but now laboring in Italy.

Marjorie Joseph, from Trinidad, works in St. Vincent, Grenada, St Lucia, Trinidad, Tobago

John VanDenBerg from California, USA but now laboring in Arizona, USA.

Here's the convention Speaking List. [Photo of Suriname Convention 2019 Speakers List]

Among the many good things shared yesterday and today, I enjoyed dear Hettie's testimony. She is the longest professing Friend in Suriname.

I'm very thankful that we belong to God, and He takes such great care of us. At the end of the last meeting, I felt like my heart was so full it was going to burst. There are 3 men that God told precisely what they needed to do: Noah, Abraham and Moses. All were men that knew precisely what God required of them. Noah received all the precise measurements and plans to build the Ark. He was faithful with what he knew. Abraham had received precise instructions to leave his father's house and follow by faith. If he had not responded and obeyed God, he would never have entered the Promised Land. But he was faithful with what he knew. Moses had to bring the precise message of God to Pharaoh and to His people. He was faithful with what he knew. Today it is our turn. In Jesus we know precisely what God requires of us. We have so many privileges of heavenly things when we do precisely what He asks of us.

Tomorrow morning, we are to be "up and at em" ready to leave before the roosters begin their incessant crowing (4 o'clock) in order to make the 4 hour drive to the Guyana border. So, I'd better call it a day and "hit the hay".

Welterusten and goede slaapen

[Rest well and have a good sleep] zzzZ

John

Suriname/Guyana border
Monday, November 11, 2019

Dear Family and Friends far and near,

Many thanks for your kind remembrances of us!

[Photo: Suriname ~ 1950]

Left to Right:

Back Row – Frank van der Merwe, Lester VanDenBerg, Jurgen Slabbert

Front Row – Minnie Collins, Mien Weikert, Anne Bakker

Someone asked what the white building is behind us? It is the Presidential Palace of Suriname. It is the same Palace and location where this photo was taken of my Father and these other Workers in 1950:

When my father was here, Suriname was still a Dutch colony. That is why the statue of the old Dutch Queen Wilhelmina was still standing in front of the Royal palace (partially viewed behind the old Workers). She reigned for 50 years. When Suriname was given independence in 1975, the new government removed the Queen. She now stands over near the old fort in Paramaribo capital. If her statue looks anything like she did in real life, then she was a beautiful lady. Dad often said she was dearly loved by her country

Just before our convention, Dan thoughtfully remembered that Anne Bakker (my father's old companion) has a son living in Paramaribo. Win Bakker, was raised in the Truth and is a retired famous Doctor. Dan invited him to come to meet me at the

Convention. He attended the Sunday morning meeting and was so friendly. He was greatly touched to see the Friends and hear the Word of God, "telling me that it was, "Indeed food for my soul." I hope he will come again to feed his soul...!

Dear Paul and Ursi arose at 3 a.m. to make sandwiches for our journey and to bid us farewell. Like the old Dutch Queen is to the Hollanders, they too are dearly loved by all the Surinamese Friends.

4:40 a.m., we are on the road now to **Guyana**.

With best wishes,

John [VanDenBerg]

TTT Editor's Note: In the absence of a written account, the above information has been compiled by the TTT Editor from various sources. Corrections or additions are most welcome; as well as other historical accounts for this country [Email TTT](#)