

# Elder Arvin Haines Stith

## 1880-1968

<https://meridianchurch.org/about/history/>

### **History of the Meridian Church Of God in Meridian, Idaho**

The local Meridian church was founded in 1923 by Elder A.H. Stith, after he had been holding Bible studies in his home. The congregation met in a local school until a church was built in 1929.

The church continued to grow throughout the years and plans for a new church were started in the 1960s. In 1968 the work began on our existing church, which was first used for the Lord's Supper Service in the spring of 1970.

During the 1990s, we also celebrated the 75th anniversary of the church and it continues to thrive with faith in God and our love for one another.

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<https://www.ucg.org/members/united-news/remembering-humble-beginnings>

### **Remembering Humble Beginnings (extract)**

Posted on **Jun 3, 2020** by Rex Sexton

In the last months of 1926, the Armstrongs began attending with the small Church of God Seventh Day congregation near Jefferson, a small town a few miles south of Salem. Ministers from the Church of God Seventh Day traveled to smaller areas once a year for six-week Public Campaigns. That winter a pastor named E.A. Stith traveled from Meridian, Idaho to hold lectures near Jefferson. The lectures were held in a white wood frame schoolhouse north of Albany. The building later became the Morningstar Grange. It has been enlarged and is still in use today.

Member Mrs. Letty Benight and her daughter, Alice, also lived in Jefferson. Letty's grandparents had been in the Church of God Seventh Day when the Seventh Day Adventists broke off from them in 1863. Alice later married Charlie Henion, who had moved to Oregon in the 1930s from Oklahoma at about the same time as Otis and Nellie Cole and the five Tierce sisters. The Coles had three sons who later served in the ministry. All five of the Tierce sisters married and raised their families in the Salem area. A number of their sons became pastors in later years. All the sisters were faithful to God's truth to the end.

I first met Mrs. Alice Henion in 1982. My wife, Patty, and our two children moved to the Albany area after the church hired me to serve as an assistant pastor working with Mr. David Mills in the Salem and Albany congregations. During the next three years I researched the events in Mr. Armstrong's book and tried to meet all the early church members who were still alive and in the area. Some were members of the Worldwide Church of God—others in the Church of God, Seventh Day were also friendly and willing to tell me their stories. Alice Henion said she could recall the following account as "clearly as yesterday," even though she was 13 years old at the time:

"Elder Stith, from Idaho, was here for six weeks of nightly meetings. The Armstrongs were staying in Salem with his parents, but came down here for every meeting. Mr. Armstrong and Elder Stith engaged in intense conversation for a long time after each meeting, sometimes for over an hour."

Mr. Armstrong continued to study and grow in understanding. In the summer of 1928 he was asked to give his first sermon. The subject was "The Sabbath Covenant" and was given at the meeting room used by the Jefferson congregation above the old Dever Store. The Ira

Curtis family owned a home near Black Dog landing. In November of 1930, a church business meeting was held at their home and Mr. Armstrong was asked to attend (p. 409). After this meeting Mr. Armstrong was recognized as a leader and gradually was called into the ministry by Jesus Christ. The home is still standing, although it has suffered floods several times.

The Oregon Conference of the Church of God Seventh Day was formed as a separate corporation in November of 1930, with the purpose of coordinating the scattered small congregations from Portland to Eugene. The conference ordained Herbert Armstrong a minister in the spring of 1931 and he began doing regular six week campaigns in the area, usually with a minister sent from Stanberry, Missouri. While Mr. Armstrong's efforts were blessed with fruit—new converts to the truth—the other men began to teach Pentecostalism and other ideas, often moving to undermine Mr. Armstrong.

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### **Herbert W Armstrong Papers Collection, #808**

Elder A.H. Stith informed him that S.S. Davison of Fairview, Oklahoma, had some Anglo-Israelite tracts written by Alfuc Davison that Armstrong could obtain by writing to him. The Davisons had been Church of God ministers for several generations. (Alfuc is probably Alpheus Davison.)

Armstrong wrote to S.S. Davison, 26 September 1928.

Davison's response to Armstrong, if any, has not survived.

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### **Herbert W Armstrong Papers Collection, #2404**

"Last summer [1928] while Bro. Stith [an elder from Idaho] was here in Oregon, I began to notice among Church of God people at Denver an under-current of feeling against me because I was originally baptized by a first-day preacher, and would not be baptized again by Bro. Sith," he wrote.

"Every possible pressure was brought to bear upon me to make me 'dissatisfied with my former baptism,' as it was put, and to be baptized all over again" (Herbert W. Armstrong letter to A.N. Dugger, 8 May, 1929, p. 1)

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### ***History of the True Church* by A. N. Dugger & C.O. Dodd, chapter 22**

He was one of the 70 elders listed.

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### **HWA letter to A. N. Dugger, 11 July 1928 in *The Autobiography of Herbert W Armstrong*, p. 478)**

"I appreciate your kind invitation to affiliate actively with the Church of God organization. Elder Stith approached me on the subject, also . . . However . . . I do not know exactly, yet, what my mission or calling is to be, or what the method of carrying it out is to be.

Unquestionably it will require organized effort, rather than attempting to carry out the mission alone and unaided."

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**Would You Accuse Jesus Christ? *Worldwide News*, 12 Nov, 1979, p. 4**

“...Yet I knew of no other that could be the true Church. With this lack of real PROOF, my wife and I decided not to join them until more sure - but to begin meeting with them, attending their services, fellowshiping with them. They were a humble, plain, yet sincere people. They had one major doctrine ALL accepted - the weekly Sabbath. Otherwise, they were divided in doctrines - a sort of a-la-carte religion. **Elder Stith believed there was no devil.** Elder Dugger and many ministers believed there was. Some believed Christ would come before the Millennium, others were postmillennialists.” [emphasis mine]

(NB: Stith’s belief would have been influenced by the Church of God (Abrahamic Faith) and Christadelphians)

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**Richard Nickels, *History of the Seventh Day Church of God. Giving & Sharing*, 1988, pp. 186-194, 215**

**Church History**

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<http://www.meridianchurch.org/introduction/church-history/> accessed 06/25/20

Here is more on its history--which basically points to it as a group that had ties to the CG7 group that had been in Stanberry, Missouri:

**"Back to Stanberry" Group**

Perhaps the major departure from the Merger Group took place in 1950-51. At Meridian, Idaho the "Bible Church of God - Seventh Day" was formed by elements formerly of Stanberry that refused to go along with the Merger. In spirit, if not in name, they constituted a "Back to Stanberry" Group.

**Philosophy of Local Autonomy**

The 1948-49 Merger of the Salem and Stanberry groups "did not unite all of the Church of God. ...

Those who had not changed their ideas and still held to usage of pork were for the Merger, but against the Merger Constitution which was made a test of faith. A minister who believed pork was all right would not get credentialed by the Merger Group. Before the 1933 split, pork or no pork was not a test. As Clair W. Ahlborn states, issues like this were "handled in Christian love."<sup>35</sup> Now it was being insisted upon. This almost guaranteed the failure of complete unification.

### **The Organization Issue**

Salem had been organized with the "Bible numbers" of 12, 7 and 70. Stanberry was not so tightly organized. It had a committee of seven. The Merger Constitution was almost a carbon copy of the Old Salem articles, and carried over the tight organization with the 12-7-70. The "local autonomy" people did not support this type of organization.

### **Formation of Meridian Group**

A.H. Stith and several other staunch pork eaters voted for the merger, because they were for unity, but their revulsion to the Merger Constitution led them to break away and in effect formulate a "Back to Stanberry" movement.

. . . several of the ministers and members of the former Stanberry General Conference could not accept the compromise in doctrine and practice that their church had made, forsaking the principles so dear to the members of God's Church. They had remained faithful to congregational government and other Biblical truths when the division came in 1933, they reasoned that now was not the time to forsake those same principles and truths.

A meeting at Meridian, Idaho was called during the summer of 1950 which resulted in the organizing of former Stanberry churches and members across the country that refused to go with the Merger. Originally called "Bible Church of God - Seventh Day," the name was changed about 1963 to "General Council of the Churches of God - Seventh Day." There was to be no "test of fellowship" for the group except "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

### **Organizers of the Movement**

A group of ministers from Idaho led the movement from the start. They published a paper, The Acts, and in the first issue, March 1, 1951, stated: "We believe firmly in unity among the Brethren. However, we are convinced that such unity cannot be achieved by a set of rules imposed upon the Brethren by a majority. This is not God's Way . . . we cannot expect to see eye to eye upon all things, for we have not all reached the same spiritual growth. This does not mean that God rejects us. He teaches us unity through tolerance and charity or Christian love . . . . Thus our motto is 'Unity through tolerance and Christian love,' . . . rather than unity through force."

Clair W. Ahlborn, a former teacher at Spring Vale Academy in Owosso, Michigan and a native of Idaho, was first edit of The Acts. But he was not a real minister and not the leader of the movement. The first officers were:

#### **General Conference Officers**

Mark Burnham, President, Meridian  
Nettie Burnham, Secretary, Meridian  
Arthur Estep, Vice President, Port Orchard, Washington  
Edna Palmer, Treasurer, Kuna, Idaho

#### **Committeemen**

A.H. Stith, Meridian  
Frank Williamson, Caldwell  
James Kling, Nampa  
Clair Ahlborn, Meridian  
Luvelt Palmer, Kuna

The first camp meeting was held in late June of 1951 at Meridian. Attendance for the evening services ranged from 60 to 200, and there were 250 on the last Sabbath. Those preaching were Elders:

Edgar Lippincott, Missouri  
A.H. Stith, Idaho  
M.W. Unzicker, Oregon  
Arthur Estep, Washington  
Boyd Dowers, Idaho  
R.C. Glassford, California  
Roy Davison, Idaho  
Mark Burnham, Idaho

At the 1952 campmeeting, 144-200 were present. The elders present were:

Harry Ford, Marion  
Jack Slankard, Charlie Salkeld, Iowa  
Jack Slankard, Charlie Salkeld, Iowa  
Lippincott, Unzicker, Estep, Stith, Ahlborn, Burnham, Idaho  
Valencia, California

By July of 1952, the Church of God Publishing House, which today houses the press and college, was ready for use.<sup>40</sup> Another paper, reporting church news, The Fellowship Herald, was established.

### **Beliefs of Meridian Group**

The Acts (standing for: "Advocating Christ the Savior") magazine contained a brief statement of beliefs, which closed with the statement: "We believe the true church organization taught in the Bible is local autonomy and that the Bible name for the church is THE CHURCH OF GOD. That the test of Christian fellowship is the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Local autonomy and no test of fellowship appeared to be the big difference between Meridian and Denver-Stanberry.

The Meridians came out with the nearest thing to a statement of beliefs, a "Declaration of Things Most Commonly Believed among Us," which they stressed was not a test of fellowship.

At first, most Meridians ate pork. Later, most of them changed their views to anti-pork. Not all their young men became conscientious objectors, but the church supported the convictions of those who did. "Pentecostalism" of the "spiritual" style rather than speaking in tongues was commonly adhered to. However, Billy Watts of Springfield, Oregon apparently went overboard on this and lost good graces with them.

Mark Burnham, pastor of the Meridian church, and son-in-law of Arvin H. Stith (deceased), said Christians should have "a real experience with the Lord." He said he is saved and that he was working with many young people who want a "born again" experience. Burnham ate pork, and probably got his ideas from his father-in-law Stith.

In 1971, Burnham reported that there were at least seventeen divisions of the Church of God which have come about since the initial split in 1933.<sup>43</sup> Actually, there were many more. Carl Palmer was minister of the Milwaukie, Oregon Church of God, in 1971 which was affiliated with Meridian. He said that there was speaking in tongues in his church, but it was not emphasized. About one third of the ministers spoke in tongues, and the movement had

been growing lately. However, he did not do so.<sup>44</sup> The Milwaukee church emphasized music.

### **British-Israelism at Meridian**

Frank Walker quit the Merger Group in 1951 because he was against their kind of organization. In 1971, he taught at Meridian's Maranatha College.

Walker's "Anglo Israel" ideas have already been discussed. He estimated that 1/3 to 2/3 of the Meridian group leaned in this direction. Roy Davison (deceased), who worked in Idaho for some time, was a firm believer in Anglo-Israelism. Other believers besides Walker were Claude Ellis and the Palmers.

The Church of God has long taught that the Jews will be restored to their homeland, and Armageddon will be fought by the Jews and their allies against Russia (Gog) and its allies. The Two-Horned Beast is said to be the Holy Roman Empire, and Babylon the Catholic Church.

Walker and his father W.K. Walker may have gotten their Anglo-Israel ideas through G.G. Rupert, whom they met in 1913-1914. Walker admitted that he believed a lot like Herbert Armstrong on the Israel Identity question, but he differed in that he thinks the United States is Ephraim, the younger and greater nation. His 32-page pamphlet, "Hope of Israel," explained that the Ten Tribes were never amalgamated back with the Jews, but continued to exist as the Celtic and Teutonic peoples of Europe and America, and elsewhere. They will remain separate until they become one nation, when the two sticks are put together, Ezekiel 37. Joseph is not dead, but he cares for his brethren, (the 5 1/2 million Jews in the United States). Thus, according to Walker, the United States will defend the Jews at Armageddon against Russia, which will be a battle of Israelites versus Gentiles.

Walker was speaker of the Bible Sabbath Association's radio program, "Echoes from Eden," for eleven years, from 1960 to 1971.

### **Meridian Not The Only True Church**

Both Palmer and Walker did not believe theirs is the "true church." Palmer noted that people in his church are baptized into Christ, not into the Church of God. The people in the true church have their names written in heaven, and no organization exists that one must belong to in order to be a true Christian. Walker, in referring to Armstrong's later development of a tight church government, said "Any people that claim to be the only people of God, I am against, because we are all God's children." Palmer worked with the Merger Group people, and had a very broad view of the Church of God.

Differences of opinion must certainly have been rife in the Meridian Group, owing to the nature of their organization. As Clair Ahlborn stated, doctrinal differences, such as pork, were handled the same way the church handled them before the division of 1933, "in Christian love."

### **Meridian Organization**

The church government of the Meridian Group is highly congregational. Ministers serve "at the pleasure of the membership." Elders are elected by the local congregations, and the churches determine to what extent they would cooperate with the General Council program. ...

Maranatha College, founded in 1963-64, had 17 students in 1971. ...

### **Meridian, Idaho Group**

The Meridian group continued to publish the Acts and Fellowship Herald magazines. The 1986 Directory states there were 26-30 affiliated congregations in North America and five in Latin America.

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