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# Home to Grenada: A Seminary Professor On His Role in the New Government

by Roy Branson

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*A few days after American and Caribbean troops landed in Grenada, October 25, 1983, Walter Douglas, professor of church history and history of religion at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, received a phone call on behalf of Sir Paul Scoon, the governor general of Grenada. Douglas was asked to serve as one of the 12 members of the advisory council that will rule Grenada as a provisional government until general elections are held. Douglas will serve the provisional government as a consultant primarily for the ministries of education, health, and foreign affairs.*

*Before making his decision, Douglas visited Grenada from Nov. 19 to Dec. 6, 1983 (taking a few days in Trinidad to fulfill his responsibilities as a member of the board of his alma mater, Caribbean Union College). In Grenada, Douglas consulted with Scoon, participated for a week in the deliberations of the advisory council, conferred with the government ministries of education and health, and preached in Seventh-day Adventist worship services.*

*Douglas' roots are deep in both Grenada's Adventist and public life. His father was a well-known farmer and merchant in Grenville, Grenada's second largest city, and in 1907 built the first Adventist church on the island. His eldest brother, Benson, before his death in 1975, had been a school teacher who, like other school teachers in Grenada, went on to prominence: Sir Eric Gairy, the first prime minister of Grenada after its independence; Sir Paul Scoon, the governor general; and Nicholas Braithwaite, the acting chairperson of the present advisory council. After legal studies in England and Canada, Benson became an attorney with a following among young Grenadian attorneys, including Maurice Bishop. Benson served as attorney general both when Grenada was an English colony and immediately after it achieved independence. In fact, Benson Douglas drafted the constitution of Grenada.*

*Walter Douglas's cousin, Waple Nedd, served as parliamentary secretary under Eric Gairy, and later, when Maurice Bishop became prime minister, Walters' sister Mary, served as Bishop's appointments secretary and a nephew became Bishop's body guard. Mary had met Bishop when she discovered him, dumped by Gairy's men beside a road, his head shaved and his body beaten. She had put him in a taxi and rushed him to a hospital. Another sister of Walter's married Ira Simmons, a 12 to 13*

year veteran of the Grenadian police force. He is now chief of detectives.

After he returned to the United States, Douglas, who first joined the board of the Association of Adventist Forums seven years ago, gave several public presentations including a talk to the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Adventist Forums. The following is drawn from these comments and several conversations Douglas and I had immediately upon his return from Grenada to Washington, D.C.

**Branson:** What did the members of your family think of your having been invited to join the provisional government?

**Douglas:** On this trip, when I first arrived, my parents were dubious about my becoming involved in the government. But as they heard, day-by-day, what had to be done to get things started again, they became more enthusiastic. My other relatives—Adventist and non-Adventists—definitely wanted me to take part.

**Branson:** What about the other Adventists on Grenada? Do they think that Adventist ministers should be so involved?

**Douglas:** Well, first of all you have to realize that Adventists throughout the Caribbean are active in public life. The minister of transportation and works in Barbados, Victor Johnson (a former head of the Barbados Labor Party, the ruling party on the island) is an active Adventist lay evangelist. In Jamaica right now, three of the ministers in Edward Seaga's cabinet are Seventh-day Adventists. Second, Adventists are prominent on Grenada itself. There are 8,000 members on the church books, out of a population of 110,000—about 7 percent of all Grenadians. Of the four resident Grenadians selected by Sir Paul Scoon to serve on the advisory council, one was Pastor Christopher Williams, the youth and lay activities director for the Adventist Mission.

**Branson:** Besides you two Adventists, are there any other of the clergy on the council?

**Douglas:** No, however, before I arrived Pastor Williams had already arranged with

the other members of the council that he and I would not be available for meetings after a certain time on Friday afternoons or Saturdays.

**Branson:** Have Adventist affairs come up at all on the council?

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**Douglas:** Yes. On Nov. 23, Pastor Williams and I said in a meeting of the advisory council that we thought church operated schools taken over by the previous government, about 85 percent of the denominational schools, should be returned to the churches, and that private property should be given back to its owners. Those proposals were adopted with no opposition. Already, the schools established by the Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, and Adventists are back in the hands of those denominations. The Bishop Government seized the schools and replaced many of the Christian teachers with Marxist instructors from Guyana, Cuba, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Incidentally, Adventists run one of the largest secondary schools on the island with about 300 to 350 students. Also, over \$400,000 in tithes and offerings from Adventists members was blocked in Grenadian banks. The previous government was planning to confiscate the money. The invasion stopped that by only days.

**Branson:** It's interesting that freedom of religious institutions and freedom of property ownership were restored together. Some historians have said that both freedoms developed at the same time in the West.

**Douglas:** That's true. We telescoped western democratic history.

**Branson:** What is the attitude of the Adventists towards the invasion of Grenada by U.S. troops?

**Douglas:** It is the same as other Grenadians. On Sabbath, Dec. 3, Adventists came from all over the island for a major celebration in the biggest park in the capital. The convention stressed total commitment to Christ, but one could also sense the excitement of that Adventist convention in their new freedom, religious and civil. The previous Wednesday there was a mass demonstration by Grenadians of every persuasion in St. Georges, the capital, where many people in speeches and prayers thanked God for the intervention of the United States.

**Branson:** Adventists thanked God specifically for the coming of the U.S. troops?

**Douglas:** Oh yes. The very first night back in Grenada my father and mother told me that the American intervention was providential. The following days I discovered almost all Grenadians felt the same way.

**Branson:** And what about you?

**Douglas:** My considerable doubts about the invasion dissipated when I saw the evidence face-to-face. There is no question that the Grenadian revolution under Bishop had become a threat to the religious foundations of Grenadian society.

**Branson:** You talk about evidence changing your attitude toward the invasion; what do you mean?

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**Douglas:** I saw documents that showed that there were 300 Grenadian students studying in Cuba, alone, as well as in Eastern Europe and Libya. I learned that Nov. 1, 1983 had been set aside as the day that Grenada was to be declared a communist state. I was also shown incontrovertible evidence that there were mind-boggling quantities of arms and ammunition stored

all over Grenada that would have clearly made it a launching pad for Communism throughout the Caribbean. Then I talked to the people. As I said, they were virtually unanimous in their praise of the American intervention.

**Branson:** But just because the Grenadians appreciated the Americans coming doesn't mean it conformed to international law—that the use of force was right in that situation.

**Douglas:** That will always be a matter of controversy, but international law is imprecise. After Bishop was killed, there was a vacuum of legitimate authority. Paul Scoon, the governor general of Grenada, was the only constitutional authority, and has said he supported the American action. As far as the Grenadians are concerned the United States was not invading Grenada; it was conducting a rescue mission. In fact, the Grenadians were upset with members of the Congressional Black Caucus who visited Grenada from the United States and criticized the American rescue mission.

**Branson:** How important was it that the American invasion was not an attack on Bishop?

**Douglas:** It was crucial.

**Branson:** Why? After all, he not only left office violently, he had gained it the same way.

**Douglas:** To answer that, I'll have to take a little time to describe the background to recent events. In 1973, Bishop and other intellectuals educated in England and Canada organized a political party, the New Jewel Movement. The following year the party won three seats in the election. In 1977, Bishop became prominent as the attorney representing Grenadian nurses on strike, dissatisfied with hospital working conditions. The following year Gairy's organized criminals, the "Mongoose Gang," beat up Bishop and his associates. One day, early in 1979, Bishop and four or five other leaders of the New Jewel Movement were forewarned by some of Gairy's own men that the prime minister

planned to kill them. That very night Bishop's coup against Gairy took place. It was hailed at that time as divine intervention. I remember that my father was visited in his home at Grenville by Bishop and was happy to pray with him, but told Bishop that if he left God out of this thing it would not succeed.

**Branson:** The people never entirely got over their loyalty toward Bishop?

**Douglas:** Right. I think that there is good

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reason for their feelings. In 1981 the council placed a Cuban or Soviet as an advisor to the head of each government ministry. Simultaneously, Cuban technicians, doctors, lawyers, agriculturists, and educators flooded into Grenada. The next year, the deputy prime minister Bernard Coard, an economist, challenged Bishop for actual leadership of the ruling council. When Bishop returned from a trip to Bulgaria, in 1982, he was told by the party that he was no longer useful to the revolution. On Oct. 11, 1983, the majority of the council voted to invite 6,800 Cubans into Grenada; Bishop refused to sign the document executing the decision. He was immediately arrested, and for three or four days people didn't know where he was. Then the people acted.

**Branson:** Were they led by previous supporters of Gairy or by dissidents within the council?

**Douglas:** Neither. A 19-year-old student at the St. Joseph Convent School in Grenville decided that something must be done. She told her classmates they should all go to the capital and try to free their prime minister. The principal, a nun, tried to stop her, but Geraldine Belmar got a hold of the school bell and rang and rang. She fired up the girls at the school and they started down

the three miles toward Grenville. There, she seized the bell at the largest secondary school in the city, and rang it until the students gathered. Those students joined the girls and headed for the airport outside Grenville. Unfortunately, they smashed windows, but they also ran on to the runway, delaying the landing of planes.

By then the news had gotten around to the other schools in other cities throughout the island, attracting still more students. By this time adults joined, providing buses and cars to bring people from all over Grenada to Market Square in the capital. Rather spontaneously they decided to march to Bishop's house. They broke through the gates, went inside, and found Bishop with his hands tied behind his back looking very weak and emaciated—so weak that he was barely able to walk. He said that he wanted to go to Fort Rupert. It was on the outskirts of town and he suspected that the members of his government had been jailed there. He wanted to talk to the troops, he said, and tell them to put down their arms.

Supported by the crowd, he started to march up the hill to Fort Rupert. Before they actually reached the front gate an armored car drove up and troops seized Bishop. Then the soldiers opened fire on the crowd. Those that weren't mowed down jumped down very precipitous embankments. Some broke arms, legs, necks. I stood on those heights; they had to be desperate to jump. An inspector of police escorting me around the fort said that, all told, about 300 Grenadians died that day. I also went into the central courtyard of the fort. I saw the bullet holes and the blood where members of Bishop's cabinet were taken out of their cells, and, while they were calling out to the soldiers, "comrades, we surrender," were shot.

**Branson:** What happened to Geraldine, the 19-year-old?

**Douglas:** When the soldiers fired point-blank into the unarmed crowd she was shot in the head. Two days later she died. The day before I arrived, her funeral was held,

and people from all over Grenada gathered again. It was the most massive funeral in the history of Grenada; Geraldine has become a national heroine.

**Branson:** It's interesting that in the United States we have hardly heard about her. Maybe it's because we have been preoccupied with other individuals, like the American medical students.

**Douglas:** You know, not once when I was in Grenada—not once—did anyone mention the students as the reason for the American action. Grenadians saw it entirely in terms of their own deliverance.

**Branson:** We keep returning to this theme, that the action by the Americans was justified, that it was an action Grenadians regarded as divinely sanctioned. Are you saying that the American use of violence in the invasion of Grenada was a direct expression of God's will?

**Douglas:** I think a theologian has the responsibility to look at events and developments within society and bring some theological interpretation to it, to introduce

dimensions that may be overlooked by the ordinary citizen.

**Branson:** Yes, but what does such a theologian see in the Grenadian event?

**Douglas:** The overcoming of evil, of bondage; the inauguration of a new beginning; the opportunity for reconciliation; and a brief reassurance, perhaps, but a vivid one, that good can be more powerful than evil.

**Branson:** Does that justify Adventist ministers—two of them, in fact—becoming part of the provisional government and drawing Adventism into public affairs?

**Douglas:** The crisis of Grenada teaches us more than anything else that we must stand in solidarity with the world, not in spiritual isolation from it. We must, as Christians, as Adventists, not abandon the world, or simply wage war against it, but act to redeem it. If we take John 3:16 seriously, if we truly believe that God loved the world, became a part of the world in order to reconcile the world to himself, then we must find fresh ways, surprising ways, in which we can embody Christ in the world.