

# Bodenmann, Albert (1925–2002)

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## REINHARD BODENMANN

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Albert Bodenmann was a missionary builder in Cameroon, pioneer missionary in Chad, and missionary administrator.

## Early Life and Education

Albert Bodenmann, born October 24, 1925, in Urnäsch, Canton Appenzell Outer Rhodes, Switzerland, and he died January 10, 2002 in Salzburg, Austria. He was missionary in Northern Cameroon and Chad.

Albert was the third of six children born to Jakob Bodenmann Jr. (October 9, 1892-March 29, 1963), an embroiderer and small landholder from Urnäsch ("Mittlere Buche"), and to Emma Berta Wyss (October 19, 1892-January 10, 1977) from Bern, Switzerland. One of his brothers, Werner (born January 2, 1927), also became pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and spent his whole life in Switzerland. Their grandfather, Jakob Bodenmann Sr. (May 12, 1863-October 5, 1945), also an embroiderer from Urnäsch ("Aplis"), was one of the first converts to Adventism in Switzerland (there is a letter from him to Ellen G. White dated November 7, 1905). Those of his descendants who converted to Adventism became known in Urnäsch under the nickname "The Jews" because of their Sabbath observance.

Albert attended primary school in Urnäsch. He was baptized June 1, 1940, in the stream called Urnäsch by Pastor Jakob Bomer. That same year he left his impoverished parental home in order to make a living and support his family by working for a farmer in Egg, Canton of Zurich. At the same time he began to work as an



Albert Bodenmann

Photo courtesy of Herbert Bodenmann.

apprentice mason.

## Education and Marriage

At the beginning of September 1950, he made his way to the Adventist Seminary, Schloss Bogenhofen in Austria, which had been founded the year before. He worked there as a farmer and craftsman, in charge of the industrial department at Bogenhofen,<sup>1</sup> while studying theology. His studies were completed in the summer of 1954. It was also at Bogenhofen that he met his future wife, Katharina Fleischer, who was employed as a cook by the school. She was born on August 28, 1925 in Botsch (today Batoş) in Transylvania, Romania, from where she and her family fled to Austria in 1944, towards the end of the war. The civil marriage was conducted August 21, 1953, in Egg, while the religious ceremony took place two days later in Zurich. From this marriage came four children: Reinhard (1955), Edeltraud (1957), Christine (1963), and Evi (1968), who were all born in the Adventist hospital of Koza, in Northern Cameroon. Katharina died in Salzburg on December 27, 2016.

## Missionary Work and Ministry

In March 1954, even before having completed his studies in Bogenhofen, Bodenmann offered his services as a missionary. He and his wife were then sent to Collonges-sous-Salève, Haute-Savoie, France, where they studied French from August 1954 to June 1955.

The missionary couple arrived in Koza, Cameroon, at the end of July 1955. Bodenmann was to serve as a missionary builder.<sup>2</sup> He worked in Koza until the fall of 1958, and between 1959 and 1964 in Dogba. Dogba is a village located about 30 kilometers southeast of Koza, but bad road conditions made it difficult to travel and the village was almost inaccessible. Thus, to access Dogba, Bodenmann had to make a 90-kilometer trip. Between 1955 and 1964, Bodenmann worked with the Swedish missionary Ruben Bergström.<sup>3</sup> While in charge of the construction work<sup>4</sup> in Koza, Bodenmann built a hospital including residences for doctors and nurses, a treatment center in Dogba, a nurses' residence, and a school. He also built a sizable number of church structures and deep-water wells throughout the area.

In October 5, 1963, Bodenmann was ordained to the ministry in Dogba by Bergström and Aimé Cosendai.<sup>5</sup> When Bergström left Dogba to retire in his home country in 1964, Bodenmann and his family returned to Koza. Within a few years, Bodenmann had acquired a good command of the local Fulfulde language of Northern Cameroon. Already in Dogba, he printed the *Sabbath School* quarterly in Fulfulde as well as a local hymn book, using the stencil printing procedure.

On July 5, 1967, the family moved 200 kilometers northeast to Fort Lamy (today N'Djamena), Chad, so that the children could attend schools operated by the French. Bodenmann became the first Adventist missionary in Chad and built the first mission building there in 1969 and 1970.<sup>6</sup> Fort Lamy was a city whose population was

half Muslim and half traditional religion.<sup>7</sup> With help mainly from the locals (esp. Paul Wankissam) and some missionaries such as Michel Denote,<sup>8</sup> and Armin and Martha Krakolinig (Austria), he established the first churches in the southern part of Chad, such as in Bongor, Moundou, Béré (West Tandjilé), Sarh, Doba, Kumra, Kélo, and Pala. A small clinic was established in Béré.

During the academic year 1978-1979, Bodenmann was granted a sabbatical year for further studies at Newbold College, Berkshire, England. In February 1979, the first civil war broke out in Chad. The mission property in N'Djamena was looted and partially destroyed. No sooner were the damages partially repaired than the second civil war broke out in March 1980, so that his wife, who had stayed behind in Collonges with their three daughters while the house was being repaired, was prevented from returning.<sup>9</sup> Between March 21 and December 18, 1980, Bodenmann was taken hostage and kept captive on the mission property in N'Djamena, Chad. Following his release, he went to Maroua from where he directed the Mission of Northern Cameroon and Southern Chad from January 1981 onwards. In May 1983, he fell from the roof of a church that he was renovating in Maroua. He was flown to the hospital in Geneva, where he arrived on May 31. After his recovery he became the director of the Adventist retirement home in Basel beginning January 16, 1984.

## Later Years

Albert retired in the fall of 1990 and settled down in Oberndorf near Salzburg, where his wife had already joined their two daughters who lived there. Bodenmann continued to preach in the surrounding churches until he was diagnosed with cancer in April 2001. Between May and November, he was treated at the university hospital in Basel, but without success. He spent his last weeks with his wife at the home of his daughters in St. Pantaleon, Upper Austria. He died on January 10, 2002, in the hospital at Salzburg and was laid to rest on January 18 in Oberndorf.

## Contribution

Albert Bodenmann's legacy is visible in his service to the Adventist church as missionary builder in Cameroon, pioneer missionary in Chad, and missionary administrator. He was instrumental during the early stages of mission construction in Cameroon. His construction work of a hospital, a church, and a number of wells contributed to the livelihood of the people in northern Cameroon. As a pioneer mission worker and administrator in Chad, he helped to establish the Adventist message in that difficult region of West Africa.

Bodenmann's theological interests centered mostly on prophecy, which he intensely studied during his entire life. He had read books of Ludwig Richard Conradi, Ellen G. White, Pierre Lanarès, and Le Roy Edwin Froom. Typical of his work as a missionary was his interest in other cultures, which he appreciated without condescension, even though he always remained convinced of the superiority of Christianity over other religions. He always tried to distinguish between Christianity and Western culture—even though he did not

always succeed from an African point of view—and advocated change among the natives only when, according to him, there was a conflict with Christianity or where the health of individuals was jeopardized. Furthermore, he opposed the missionary practice of making converted polygamists separate from all their wives, excepting one, since the repelled women were usually driven to mendicancy or prostitution. His patience and ability to repair old equipment were also remarkable. Throughout his life he remained a rather reserved and quiet individual. Like almost all the missionaries of his time, he did not succeed in freeing himself entirely from the burden of a promoter of Western civilization in Africa.<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

1. “Here and There,” *Quarterly Review*, September 1955, 12.

2. Ibid.

3. See Ruben Bergström, “Converting the Kirdis (Keer-dee) in North Cameroun,” *Mission Quarterly*, March 1965, 12ff.

4. Albert Meyer, “Visiting Mission Stations in the French Cameroun,” *Quarterly Review*, September 1956, 4.

5. A picture of the ordination can be found in “A Picture Story from North Cameroun,” *ARH* June 18, 1964, 21

6. "Work Being Established in Gabon and in Chad," *ARH*, February 13, 1969, 18; Jean Zurcher, "New Advance in the Equatorial African Union," *Quarterly Review*, June 1974, 4.
  7. Samuel Monnier, "Laymen on the March in African Territories of the Southern European Division," *Quarterly Review*, September 1968, 3.
  8. Ralph F. Waddell, "Year-old Work in Chad Shows Promise of Growth," *ARH*, October 17, 1968, 18.
  9. Maurice Zehnacker and Claude Villeneuve, "Saved Through Adversity," *Mission*, December 4, 1982, 23.
  10. With the encouragement of his son, he wrote down, during his stay at the hospital in Basel, his reminiscences and thoughts as a missionary. The family archive, which constitutes the source of this article, is kept with the author of this entry.
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