



SDA Church in Algiers, capital city of Algeria.

Photo courtesy of Yousef Jem.

Algeria

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Yousef Jem is a pseudonym, used for the safety of the author, whose real name is known to the editors.

Background

Algeria is located along the Mediterranean coast in an area called the Maghreb, the western part of North Africa. Its northern section is coastal and fertile, and the southern part is mostly desert and sand. Phoenicians settled

the coast in 900 B.C., while the Berbers ruled the country's interior. However, by the 2nd century A.C., the Phoenicians were gone, and Christianity began infiltrating the area. In the 8th century, Muslims conquered Algeria, and Algeria became part of the Arab world. But because of its location, many different types of people have traveled through it, giving it cultural influences from all over.

In the 16th century, the Ottomans took over the country. Their influence waned in the 1800s and, after a brief period of independence, the French began a war in 1830 to conquer the area. French domination lasted until 1954, when an Algerian nationalist movement inspired a brutal war that ended in independence (1962).

After the independence a series of constitutional reforms gave space and preference to Islam in the Algerian state. Among them is the decree of March 12, 1976, prohibiting gambling and the sale of alcoholic beverages to Muslims. The decree was promulgated on August 16, 1976, and the obligatory "day of rest" was changed from Sunday to Friday, the holy day of Islam. The decree of February 27, 1979, prohibited the raising of pigs by Muslims.¹

In addition to these decrees, there were others, such as declaring that Islam should be the state religion, that the president of the republic should be of Muslim confession, that all private schools be nationalized, and that more mosques be built in each city. Stora (French-Algerian historian) indicates that during the first 20 years following the independence of Algeria, the Islamic religion was used as an instrument to contain a possible advance of secular and democratic currents, but above all as a weapon to legitimize power.²

With the cry for Algerian independence, about a million people of European origin, known as the "pieds-noirs" (black feet), had to leave the country. Virtually all "pieds-noirs" including Adventists, left Algeria.

Today, Algeria has 99 percent of the population identifying as Sunni Muslims and only 0.4 percent as Christians.

Beginnings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Algeria (1905-1962)

The first Seventh-day Adventist in Algeria was Joseph Gomis. He became acquainted with the Adventist message through reading *Les Signes des Tempes* and was later baptized. In about 1886 he settled as a baker in the town Relizane, in the province Oran, Algeria. Gomis shared his faith with several of his family members and friends and some accepted the new doctrines.⁴ In 1889 J. D. Comte and Albert Vuilleumier visited these new converts, who were later baptized by Vuilleumier. Many of them emigrated to South America, but those who remained continued to observe the Sabbath without guidance or visitation for many years.⁵

Doru Pleniceanu's⁶ master's thesis, written in French (2002), is the main documented source that recounts the official establishment of the Adventist movement in Algeria from this point in 1905 until its independence in 1962.⁷

The work in Algeria was not recognized until the third Annual Session of the Latin Union (L. U.) in July 1905. S. Jespersson and his wife were sent as the first official missionaries to Algeria to begin the "medical missionary" work there.⁸ Following the Jesperssons, the L. U. sent Paul Steiner in 1907 to assist them in evangelistic work, but due to health reasons he had to leave before completing his first year.⁹ In 1908 Ulysse Augsburg (an experienced evangelist) and Joseph Abella (the first official colporteur, who at the age of 16 may have been the youngest missionary to serve in Algeria) joined him. Abella was also the first missionary to learn Arabic, realizing that this was the only way to reach the indigenous population.¹⁰

During the Latin Union Conference session in 1909, Albert Guyot was sent to Algeria, first to Algiers, then in October 1910 to Oran to restart the work among the French people begun several years earlier. Renewing contact with the early members in Relizane, he met Gomis, then 77 years old, and found four large families keeping the Sabbath.¹¹ Over the years the work spread gradually to the different sections of Algeria as a result of the work of Paul Badaut, J. C. Guenin, R. T. E. Colthurst, W. E. Hancock, and others.

In 1912 the mission was attached directly to the General Conference. It was reassigned to the Latin Union Conference in 1917 after World War 1. The Algerian Mission was organized in 1924 with Albert Meyer in charge and with a membership of 61.¹² The first Algerian indigenous girl was baptized during the Annual session of the Mission in Mostaganem in September 1926, and a second was baptized a few years later, although the exact date is unknown. In 1928 the North African Union (NAU) composed of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya was organized, and its headquarters was established in Algiers, capital city of Algeria, under the first president Jules Rey.¹³

The spread of the Adventist message in Algeria before its independence was developed through canvassing work, distribution of Bibles, Adventists magazines (*Revue Adventiste*), public lectures, Bible courses by correspondence, the Dorcas society, and Adventist schools. The first school, a boys' school for ages 12 to 17, opened in Algiers in 1932. A second school opened in Mostaganem in 1955 and a third one in Rélizane in 1956.¹⁴

Medical missionary work was another important avenue in the spread of the message. The Adventist Health Center, Institute Vie et Santé, situated in the hill of Birmandreis (Bir Mourad Rais), opened in 1933. Dispensaries were also created all over the country with the first one in Rochambeau (1929), the second in Rélizane (1956), and the third in Mostaganem (1956).¹⁵

Membership slowly increased over the years, and by 1933 there were 207 members in the Algeria Mission.¹⁶ A church and headquarters building were built in 1950 on Street 3 de Sacré Cœur in the center of Algiers and is the only Adventist building still existing today (2022). By 1958 the Algerian-Tunisian Mission had 12 churches or companies, 15 Bible workers, two colporteurs, and a membership of 540.¹⁷

The war of 1914-1918, the war of 1939-1945, and the civil Algerian war between 1954-1962 made the missionary work in Algeria extremely difficult. Many missionaries came to serve between 1905 and 1962. Most stayed for

only a few weeks or months, some for a few years, and just the occasional missionary dedicated a large share of his working life. Unfortunately, there is not much information to trace their journeys. When Algeria became independent in 1962, more than a million Europeans left, and with them, nine-tenths of the Adventist members.¹⁸

Adventism After the Independence of 1962 and Up to 1980

For this next 30-year period written documentation is scarce. Most of the information comes from a few oral sources. Much of it was recounted by John Kempf who had worked in Algeria and Morocco between 1952 and 1959, returning later in the 1980s to reorganize the work in North Africa.

The effects of the Independence decimated Adventism, and the church almost disappeared.¹⁹ The French had to be repatriated, and the few local members were left alone without a guide. Henri Pichot remained as president of the North African Union (NAU), which included Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. In the *Revue Adventiste* he said the following in relation to the mission that the church had to face in Algeria: "The massive exodus of Europeans towards more forgiving skies has almost completely stopped evangelization that until then had been limited to Christian elements. Suddenly we had to make our arrangements to guide our work on behalf of 25 million [indigenous] in our North African countryside."²⁰

The coup in 1964 and the adoption of the socialist-Marxist regime made evangelistic work even more difficult for the remaining Christian churches. In 1966, on the death of Henri Pichot, Paul Bernard succeeded him as president of the North African Union.

The most difficult period was faced by Maurice Verfaillie, who assumed leadership of what was left of the NAU from 1968 to 1971. During this period he witnessed the exodus of the last few remaining teachers and pastors. At that time, no more than thirty Adventists were left in the union.

Following the Independence several buildings and institutions were requisitioned by the government while other properties were classified as "available for possession." The school in Algiers was closed in 1968. The Vie et Santé Adventist Health Center came under possession of the government, and the Bône (Annaba) Adventist temple was negotiated and sold. The only building that remained was the temple in Algiers, although it was stripped of the attached offices and apartments, which were later taken and occupied by local families.²¹

Evangelistic efforts were confined to Arabic radio broadcasts and a bilingual Arabic-French Bible correspondence operated by Essaïe Peliccer from France.²² Peliccer also wrote many pamphlets in Arabic and translated much of Ellen White's writings. The few who remained in Algeria opened food and clothing distribution centers, and a small school offering five classes opened in Algiers. Another small school offering two classes opened in Bône (Annaba), and two dispensaries began operating in Mostaganem and Rélizane.

In 1967 Claude Galdéan, secretary-treasurer of the Algerian Mission, traveled every quarter from France to Algeria to visit and encourage the small group of faithful who gathered in the Algiers temple every Sabbath,

fighting to not lose the only remaining Adventist church building in all of Algeria.

Brother Duplouy replaced Mauricie Verfaillie as the last president of the NAU to live in Algeria. Under his mandate, the Moroccan (1971) and Tunisian Missions were dissolved. By 1974 the Algerian government liquidated and closed most of the Protestant-evangelical groups and missions, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Salvation Army. However, they still tolerated the Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, and Adventist churches and allowed the Algerian Mission to continue to operate.²³ Following Duplouy, Robert Erdmann arrived from France to take care of the Algerian Mission.

New Beginnings in the 1980s

In the 1980s the general anger toward France gradually dissipated as a new generation of Algerian youth emerged that had not known the liberation war or its excesses. They aspired to have more freedom and were open to the Western model of life and religion. Surprising and emotional conversions began to emerge in the lives of these young Algerians. As a result, two evangelical university professors in Algiers (one Canadian and the other German) formed a group for those interested in learning about Christianity. Thus began a new era for both the local youth and the Adventist Church.

In this context of the Algerian awakening to Christianity, the Adventist Church sent the Kempf family to reorganize the mission work in North Africa. There had been an absence of missionaries for several years, and the Kempfs understood the culture, having previously worked in Algeria and Morocco (1952-1959). They were also experienced missionaries who had opened mission stations in difficult countries such as the Central African Republic and the Congo-Brazzaville.

Jean Kempf and his wife went first to Morocco to help Esaïe Pellicer and then in September of 1981 continued the reconnaissance in Algeria with the help of Galdéano.

Gilbert Carayon (1983-1989)

In early 1984 Gilbert Carayon and his wife, Lydie Abdella, were the first permanent missionary family after Independence to reenter Algeria. Obtaining a permanent residency was not easy. The Adventist Church had been absent for more than ten years, and the Algerian authorities were not inclined to have a religious Adventist settle in the country. After firmly opposing them for two years, Carayon finally managed to obtain residency due to the intervention of Cardinal Duval,²⁴ a non-judgmental Catholic religious man who loved everyone.

Carayon's work is summarized by clandestine meetings with evangelical groups and observation of the strategies used by churches still tolerated in Algeria such as Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant. They made many friends and finally gathered a group of thirty people for worship, including some expatriates, some Algerians, and other Adventist students from sub-Saharan Africa.

In 1988, due to the many demonstrations of the Algerian people, President Chadli Bendjedid proposed a referendum that would sweep away the one-party regime. The new constitution established multi-parties (about fifty emerged), and the idea of greater freedom resurfaced again. For a period of three to four years, many curious Algerians, freed from fear, approached the Christian churches, including the Adventists, to learn more about Christianity.

This period was a blessing and challenge at the same time. Young college students flooded the church seeking answers about Christianity, but keeping the Sabbath was almost impossible since Saturday was considered the first day of the week. In addition, the observance of Saturday reminded Algerians of the conflicts between Arabs, Jews, and Palestinians.

Toward the end of his term, Carayon had a conflict of interest with some doctrinal issues. He left the Adventist Church and his position as a pastor to go and study theology in Strasbourg. He later became a pastor in the Reformed Church of France.

Jean Kempf (1989-1990)

The difficulties in finding someone to replace Carayon forced Jean Kempf (still president of the North Africa Mission) to become interim pastor of the Algeria Mission for one year.

Kempf worked with Roland Fayard (director of the Misiòn au Service des Musulmans [MISSERM] health department) to promote the health seminars developed by the Commission Internationale pour la prévention de l'alcoolisme et de la dépendance à l'égard des drogues (CIPADED). He also collaborated with other NGOs, the Croissant Rouge Algérien (Red Crescent),²⁵ and the Youth Protection organization to develop programs to prevent drugs and smoking. Five-Day Plans to Quit Smoking were organized and carried out under the leadership of Jean Ribot and Fayard. These events were usually publicized throughout the local press and media.

The Adventist Church became the front runner of medical campaigns. Other Christian churches fully supported these activities, proud to see that Christians could contribute positively in the delicate context of a Muslim country.

Kempf also became popular among the Kabyles, a Berber ethnic group indigenous to Kabylia in the northern mountains of Algeria. They were the most open to receiving the message, and some even descended from their mountain communities to meet him. In 1990 two baptismal ceremonies were performed in a basin covered by a beautiful waterfall in the middle of Djurdjura, the chain of mountains that forms the backbone of the Kabyle area.²⁶

Pierre Kempf (1990-1993)

In 1990 Pierre Kempf replaced his father, Jean Kempf. During his three-year term in Algeria, he developed “le foyer,” a new, creative approach to reaching the youth.²⁷ In essence, the temple in Algiers was divided into four spaces, each one hosting a different activity. Biblical films could be watched in the video space; good books could be found in the library; there was always coffee, tea, and comfy couches in the kitchen; and the fourth space was used for Bible study.²⁸ All activities centered around food during the week or the traditional potluck after Sabbath services.

A third of the church members were university students, the majority from Rwanda. The other two-thirds were Algerians, mostly from Kabyle origins. The programs were conducted in French and sometimes translated into Arabic. Kempf also made quarterly visits to study the Bible with interested people in other cities around Algeria, such as Biskra, El Oued, Tougourt, Ghardaïa, Oran, Constantine, and Annaba.

Pierre expanded on the work with CIPADED begun by his father, Jean. He was given airtime on radio and television to promote his programs, so doors opened for him to present health seminars in different cities around the country. Pierre left in 1993 to study “Islamología” at Fuller University in the United States.

The Algerian Crisis, which began in 1992, created a lot of hostility among the locals toward the missionaries. Kempf’s successor stayed for a brief period, returning to France after receiving a death threat.

Algerian Crisis and its Consequences for the Church (1994-2000)

During the 1990s Algeria went through a period of political instability and insecurity with the emergence of a civil war better known as the “black decade.” From 1994 to 2002, the mission work in Algeria was practically abandoned for seven years. All missionaries and foreign representatives left the country. Karim, a local member, remembers that for the locals left behind²⁹ this was a synonym of abandonment by those who claimed they came to reach them. For some, this was a cautious decision. For others, it was an act of cowardice.

The Algerian crisis, however, led to a great spiritual awakening that was manifested through thousands of conversions to Christianity throughout the territory of Algeria, especially the Kabyle region.³⁰

In the year 2000 Jean Kempf, already retired, returned to Algeria to resuscitate the Adventist mission, while at the same time search for a more permanent missionary family. Jean’s wife Sigrid reports that when they returned to Algeria in 2000, the church did not have the right to proselytize, hold public lectures, or distribute literature. In short, they could do almost nothing except to receive people that came to the church asking for information.

Roger Bouricard (2003-2010)³¹

Pastor Roger Bouricard arrived in Algeria in 2003 to replace Kempf, who left due to his delicate health and age. They worked together for a couple of months in the transition process. In 2004 Kempf returned to France and Bouricard worked alone from 2004 to 2005. He continued with the fellowship meetings and Bible studies that were held in "le foyer" (meeting house in the church). His patience and ability to listen made him well-loved among the church members, as well as in the community,

Birth of the Church "Mount of Olives" in Fethoune

Only oral records and testimonies from some of the pioneers and indigenous tell the history of the birth of the Fethoune Church in the Kabyle region of Algeria.

Jean Kempf tells of an Algerian named Sadek Agchariou whom he baptized in the 1990s, who then took the message to his hometown in the Kabyle region.³² According to the testimony of Hanafi Idiri, in 2002 a group of seven men began to gather under an olive tree in an olive garden two kilometers from Feythone. Various pastors including Jean Kempf, Bouricard, Jude Cuniah, and Marcel Fernandez used to visit and study the Bible with them. It was a difficult decision for the men to join the Adventist Church, but one by one they got baptized, the last one on February 27, 2004.³³

In 2005 Marcel Fernández, president of the Maghreb Section and vice president of l'ATMA (Trans Mediterranean Mission), received a request for help to purchase a house in Fethoune to serve as the Adventist Church. The negotiations were made with total discretion, and the house was bought for 10,000 (ten thousand) euros.³⁴

In 2006 the house was ready for Sabbath services. Although they did not initially have the legal permission of the Algerian authorities, they later recognized them as a Christian church. Today (2022) Feythone is one of the few churches in the Middle East and North Africa Union (MENAUI) where the entire congregation is made up of indigenous with the worship programs being held in the local language (Kabyle).³⁵

Pierre and Marie-Pierre Pechoux (2005 to 2010)³⁶

In October 2005 Pierre Pechoux arrived in Algeria as president of the Algerian Mission. Marie, Pechoux's wife, was also a theologian and pastor, and she took care of the evangelistic work, organization of the camp meetings, and women's ministry events in Algiers and Feythone.³⁷ Roger Bouricard, the former pastor, returned to Algeria at the same time to take up duties as pastor of the Algiers Church. This allowed Pechoux more time to attend to the administrative issues of the mission.³⁸

Pechoux and his family returned to France in 2010, not knowing that foreign missionaries would be absent for the next five years. One reason was due to the dissolution of L'ATMA in 2012 and its replacement by the Middle East and North Africa Union (MENAUI).³⁹ The second reason was, according to Hanafi Idiri, that obtaining a religious visa had become complicated for missionaries. Algerian authorities were alerted to the strong

emphasis on evangelization used by most evangelical churches, particularly in the Kabyle region. In 2016 a new law was put into effect that prevented proselytism and evangelization of the indigenous.

Current Days

Missionary work in Algeria has endured many challenges from the time of its beginnings in 1905 until today (2022). The two world wars and internal wars made working among the indigenous population even more difficult.

Today (2022) the Algerian law prohibits public religious events and public proselytism but does not prohibit an Algerian from being a Christian. It is believed that there are more than forty thousand undeclared Christians in the country who do not make themselves known openly in order to avoid the rejection of their family and society.

Although Christianity is more tolerated in Algeria than in other Middle East and North African countries, there is still great difficulty in bringing missionaries to the country. Another challenge is the lack of financial resources. Several projects, including Centers of Influence (COI), are waiting to be financed. Efforts are primarily focused on friendship evangelism, discipleship of new converts, and mentoring local leaders. Today (2022) the North Africa Union is under the administration of the Middle East and North Africa Union.⁴⁰

Organization

From 1905 to 1912 and 1917 to 1924, the Algerian Mission was under the Latin Union. From 1913 to 1917, it became an attached field to the General Conference but was returned to the Latin Union in 1917 until 1923. From 1924 to 1955, it came under the North Africa Union Mission. It was renamed the Algerian-Tunisian Mission in 1956, remaining under the NAUM until 1967, after which it became an attached field under the Southern European Division until 1970. From 1971 to 1995, it was renamed the North Africa Mission and became an attached mission under the Euro-Africa Division. From 1996 to 2011, it got reassigned to the Trans Mediterranean Territories (ATMA) but was renamed Maghreb Section in 2001. In 2012 the Maghreb Section was reassigned to the Middle East and North Africa Mission but got renamed in 2016 as the North Africa Region, currently (2022) under the Middle East and North Africa Union.⁴¹

Superintendents/Directors

Albert Meyer (1924-1927); Jules Rey (1928-1936); J. De Caenel (1937-1945); Henri Pichot (1945-1947); Paul Girard (1948-1953); Henri Pichot (1954-1966); Paul Bernard (1967-1971); Jean Kempf (1984-1994); Ulrich Frikart (1995); Marcel Fernandez (2001-2005); Pierre Pechoux (2005-2011); Reubens Rogerio da Conceicao (2014-2015); Dilson Bezerra (2015-Present).⁴²

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Benjamin Stora, *Algérie, histoire contemporaine 1830-1988* (Alger: Casbah Editions, 2004), 286.
2. Stora, 287.
3. Pieds-noirs are people of European origin, mainly French, who were born in Algeria during the French colonial period from 1830 to 1962, the vast majority of whom went to France as soon as Algeria gained its independence, or in the following months.
4. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (SDAE), rev. ed. (1996), s.v. "Algeria."
5. Ibid.
6. Doru Pleniceanu, "L'implantation du mouvement adventiste en Algérie: 1905-1962" (M.A. thesis, Salève Adventist University, 2002).
7. After independence the Adventist church in Algeria lost several of its buildings and members. The French had to be repatriated and the few local members were left alone without a guide. They also ended up disappearing.
8. Pleniceanu, 31-34.
9. Ibid., 31-33.
10. Ibid., 61.
11. Ibid., 33.

12. "Algeria," SDAE.
13. Pleniceanu, 37.
14. Ibid., 68.
15. Ibid., 71.
16. Ibid., 76.
17. "Algeria," SDAE.
18. Ibid.
19. Jean and Sigrid Kempf, interview by the author, Lyon, France, October 28, 2019.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. "Algeria," SDAE.
23. Jean and Sigrid Kempf, interview by the author, Lyon, France, October 28, 2019.
24. The cardinal was an emblematic figure highly respected by all, including the Algerian authorities. He had opted for Algerian nationality over independence and managed to convince several priests and nuns to stay in Algeria to give a silent Christian witness through charity works. Duval defended a common front of all the churches still present in Algeria. The elimination of one Christian denomination could drag the downfall of the others. He welcomed and interceded with the government on behalf of the Carayon family.
25. The Muslim Algerian Red Crescent is the equivalent of the Red Cross in Christian countries.
26. Jean and Sigrid Kempf, interview by the author, Lyon, France, October 28, 2019.
27. "Le Foyer" is a French term that literally means "home." It was a meeting place where people felt at home. They could talk, eat, enjoy a movie, study the Bible, and pray. It was, so to speak, the second home of those who, for various reasons, could not express their faith in other places or wanted to learn more about God.
28. Jean and Sigrid Kempf, interview by the author, Lyon, France, October 28, 2019.

29. Karim is a young Algerian who worked with Pierre Kempf to develop seminars with CIPADED. When no one was left in the church building, Karim indicated that he had nowhere to go due to religious persecution, so he settled in the CIPADED offices. Jean and Pierre Kempf believe that Karim's presence also helped not lose the only building that remained of the French era.
30. Jean and Sigrid Kempf, interview by the author, Lyon, France, October 28, 2019.
31. Roger Bouricard is originally from France. He studied theology at Collonges Adventist University, France. His missionary work in Algeria is divided into two stages. The first one was during the change of leadership between Jean and Roger (2004). And then Bouricard was invited by Pierre Pechoux to continue taking care of the church as local pastor of Algiers (2005-2010). They worked together in Algeria. He is currently retired and lives in Gap, France. Although retired, he is involved in the evangelistic work for the community where he lives (Roger Bouricard, interview by the author, Marseille, France, October 27, 2019).
32. Jean and Sigrid Kempf, interview by the author, Lyon, France, October 28, 2019.
33. Hanafi Idiri, interview by the author, Algeria, December 11, 2020.
34. Ibid.
35. Personal knowledge of the author.
36. Pierre Pechoux was born in France. He married Marie Pechoux. They both studied theology and worked as pastors in France. They currently work in Marseille (Pierre and Marie P  choux, interview by the author, Marseille, France, October 27, 2019).
37. Pierre and Marie P  choux, interview by the author, Marseille, France, October 27, 2019.
38. Ibid.
39. General Conference Annual Council Executive Committee, October 15, 2012, GCC 12-119. General Conference Secretariat, Policy and Projects Manager/Recording Secretary, General Conference Secretariat records, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
40. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, "North Africa Union," accessed December 30, 2021, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB2020.pdf>.
41. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, 1905-2020, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/Forms/AllItems.aspx>.
42. Ibid.

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