

# Malawi

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Seventh-day Adventism began in Malawi when missionary Joseph Booth, influenced by Adventist teachings, urged the Church to establish a mission in Nyasaland. In 1902, the denomination purchased the Malamulo property, officially launching its work in Malawi, with [Thomas H. Branch](#) and his family pioneering the mission despite significant early challenges.

## Overview of the Country

The Republic of Malawi is a landlocked country in southeastern Africa bordered by Tanzania to the north, Zambia to the west, and Mozambique to the south and east. The country occupies approximately 118,484 square kilometers (45,747 square miles), nearly one-fifth of which is covered by Lake Malawi, one of Africa's largest freshwater lakes and an important source of transportation, fishing, and economic activity. The capital city is Lilongwe, while Blantyre serves as the country's principal commercial and industrial center.<sup>1</sup> Malawi has a population exceeding twenty million people and is composed primarily of Bantu-speaking communities. Major ethnic groups include the Chewa, Yao, Lomwe, Tumbuka, Ngoni, Sena, Tonga, Ngonde, and Nkhonde peoples. Chichewa is the national language while English serves as the official language and is widely used in government, education, and commerce. Christianity constitutes the largest religion in the country, with Islam concentrated mainly along the lakeshore and in the southern districts. Traditional African religious beliefs continue to influence many cultural practices and coexist with Christian and Islamic traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Before European contact, the region was occupied by several organized African kingdoms, most notably the Maravi Kingdom, from which the modern nation derives its name. During the 16th century, Portuguese traders entered the region through the Zambezi River system, followed in the 19th century by British explorers, missionaries, and commercial interests. The travels of David Livingstone between 1858 and 1863 attracted considerable attention in Britain and stimulated missionary activity throughout the region. In 1891, Britain formally established the British Central Africa Protectorate, later renamed Nyasaland. Following constitutional reforms and nationalist movements led by Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the country attained independence on July 6, 1964, and adopted the name Malawi.<sup>3</sup> Religion played an important role in Malawian society long before the arrival of Christianity. Different ethnic communities worshipped one supreme creator known by various names,

including *Mulungu* among the Chewa and *Chiuta* among the Tumbuka and Tonga. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Christian missionary societies established schools, medical institutions, and churches throughout the country. Presbyterian missionaries founded the Livingstonia and Blantyre missions, the Universities' Mission to Central Africa established Anglican work on Likoma Island, Roman Catholic missionaries expanded their activities after the turn of the twentieth century, and the Dutch Reformed Church later entered the country. These missionary initiatives significantly influenced the educational, medical, and religious landscape into which the Seventh-day Adventist Church would later establish its mission.<sup>4</sup> Today Malawi remains one of the countries within the [Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division](#) (SID) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The work is administered through the Malawi Union Conference, headquartered in Lilongwe, and is organized into several local conferences. By 2025 the Church reported more than 760,000 baptized members worshiping in over 1,700 organized churches, making Malawi one of the strongest Adventist memberships within the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division.<sup>5</sup>

## Religious Background and the Introduction of Seventh-day Adventism (1891–1902)

The establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi occurred during a period of intense missionary expansion throughout sub-Saharan Africa. By the close of the nineteenth century, several Protestant and Roman Catholic missionary societies had already established educational institutions, medical work, and evangelistic ministries in what was then known as British Central Africa Protectorate, later Nyasaland. The Livingstonia Mission of the Free Church of Scotland, the Blantyre Mission of the Church of Scotland, the Anglican Universities' Mission to Central Africa on Likoma Island, and the Roman Catholic missions all contributed significantly to the religious and educational landscape before the arrival of Seventh-day Adventists. Their work introduced literacy, formal education, medical care, and Christianity to many communities, thereby creating an environment receptive to additional missionary initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

The origins of Seventh-day Adventist work in Malawi are closely associated with Joseph Booth (1851–1932), an English missionary whose independent spirit and commitment to missionary expansion profoundly influenced the development of Christianity in Central Africa. Booth first arrived in Nyasaland in 1892 as a Baptist missionary after financing his own journey from England. Although he cooperated with several Protestant mission organizations, he became increasingly dissatisfied with what he perceived as paternalistic missionary practices and their limited emphasis on African leadership and self-support. These convictions eventually led him to establish the Zambezi Industrial Mission, an institution that sought to combine evangelism, education, vocational training, and African self-reliance.<sup>7</sup> During a visit to the United States near the close of the nineteenth century, Booth encountered Seventh-day Adventist teachings through contact with Seventh Day Baptists and subsequently the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Convinced of the biblical basis of the seventh-day Sabbath and

other distinctive Adventist doctrines, he accepted the Adventist message and appealed to the General Conference to establish an official mission in Nyasaland. His appeal coincided with the closure of the small Seventh Day Baptist mission, creating an opportunity for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to establish a permanent presence in the territory.<sup>8</sup>

In 1902 the General Conference purchased the former Seventh Day Baptist mission property at Malamulo, located in the Makwasa area of southern Nyasaland. The name *Malamulo*, meaning "Commandments" in Chichewa, reflected the mission's emphasis on biblical teaching and the observance of God's law. The acquisition of this property marked the formal beginning of Seventh-day Adventist work in Malawi and provided a strategic location from which educational, medical, agricultural, and evangelistic ministries could be developed. The General Conference appointed Thomas H. Branch and his family to pioneer the new mission. Branch, an African American missionary, was among the earliest Black Seventh-day Adventist missionaries sent to Africa. His wife and daughter, Mabel Branch, joined him in the work, with Mabel serving as one of the first Adventist teachers at Malamulo. Their appointment represented an important milestone in the denomination's commitment to global mission and African evangelization. However, the mission faced numerous challenges during its formative years, including limited financial resources, administrative difficulties, inadequate infrastructure, and the racial attitudes that characterized colonial society at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

Administrative tensions during the mission's earliest years eventually prompted the General Conference to reorganize the work. Leadership responsibilities were transferred to experienced missionaries, including J. H. Watson and later J. C. Rogers, who provided greater organizational stability. Under their leadership the mission expanded its educational program, established additional village schools, and strengthened evangelistic outreach throughout southern Nyasaland. These developments laid the institutional foundation upon which the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi would continue to grow during the twentieth century. The establishment of Malamulo Mission represented far more than the opening of a single mission station. It became the nucleus of Seventh-day Adventist ministry in Malawi, integrating evangelism with education, agriculture, medical work, and leadership development. From this center, the Adventist message spread steadily to surrounding communities, giving rise to a network of schools, churches, and mission stations that would eventually extend throughout the country.<sup>10</sup>

## Malamulo Mission: Foundation and Early Development (1902–1930)

The purchase of Malamulo Mission in 1902 marked the formal beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi and established what would become the denomination's oldest and most influential institution in the country. Located in the Makwasa area of southern Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), the mission became the administrative, educational, medical, and evangelistic center from which Adventist work expanded across the

territory during the twentieth century.

Before the arrival of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the property had been occupied by a Seventh Day Baptist mission established under the leadership of Joseph Booth. Financial and administrative challenges led to the closure of the Baptist mission after only a short period of operation. Recognizing both the strategic location of the property and the opportunities it presented for mission work, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists purchased the station in 1902. The acquisition provided the denomination with an established mission site from which it could begin organized work in Nyasaland. The name Malamulo, meaning "*Commandments*" in Chichewa, reflected the mission's emphasis on biblical teaching and observance of God's law.<sup>11</sup> Although the purchase of the property marked an important milestone, additional research is needed regarding the history of the land before its occupation by the Seventh Day Baptists. Future studies using colonial land records, Malawi government archives, and mission correspondence may further clarify the original ownership of the property, the circumstances surrounding its transfer to the Baptist mission, and the legal framework under which it was later purchased by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Such research would also contribute to a better understanding of the land disputes that emerged during the post-independence period.<sup>12</sup>

The General Conference appointed Thomas H. Branch to lead the newly established mission. Branch and his family arrived in Nyasaland in 1902 to organize the work and lay the institutional foundations of the Adventist mission. His daughter, Mabel Branch, became one of the first teachers at Malamulo, demonstrating the central role that education would play in Adventist mission strategy. Despite the enthusiasm of the pioneers, the mission faced considerable challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, unfamiliar climatic conditions, and the racial attitudes that characterized colonial society. Administrative difficulties also arose during the early years, leading church leaders to reorganize the management of the mission. The appointment of J. H. Watson and subsequently J. C. Rogers brought greater organizational stability and accelerated the growth of the mission. Rogers expanded the educational program by establishing village schools in Thava, Masenjere, Muonekera, Chifide, Milala, and Matandani. These schools became centers of literacy, Bible instruction, and community development, while also preparing future Malawian church leaders. Education quickly emerged as one of the defining characteristics of Adventist mission work in Nyasaland!<sup>13</sup>

Agriculture formed another essential component of the mission program. Malamulo developed extensive farmland that supplied food for missionaries, students, and the surrounding communities while also providing practical vocational training. Contemporary reports indicate that by 1910 the mission maintained substantial livestock, cultivated crops, and operated a dairy enterprise that produced milk and butter for sale. Income generated from agricultural activities helped sustain the expanding mission and illustrated the Adventist philosophy of integrating education, labor, and evangelism. Medical ministry likewise became an integral part of the mission's work. Trained nurses were assigned to outlying mission stations, including Matandani, extending healthcare to communities with limited access to medical services. Although initially modest in scale, these

efforts laid the foundation for what would later become Malamulo Hospital, one of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's most significant healthcare institutions in Malawi. By 1911, Malamulo Mission had become the center of an expanding network of schools and congregations. Mission reports recorded more than forty village schools operating under its supervision, reflecting the rapid acceptance of Adventist education and evangelism among local communities. Through its integrated program of education, agriculture, healthcare, and gospel ministry, Malamulo became the model upon which subsequent Adventist missions in Malawi were established.<sup>14</sup>

## Expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist Church Throughout Malawi (1910–1965)

Following the successful establishment of Malamulo Mission, the Seventh-day Adventist Church entered a period of sustained expansion throughout Nyasaland. Church leaders adopted a mission strategy that integrated evangelism, education, medical ministry, and agriculture, establishing mission stations that served as centers for the surrounding communities. From Malamulo, Adventist work gradually spread into the southern, central, and northern regions of the country, transforming the denomination from a single mission station into a nationwide church.

### EXPANSION THROUGH MISSION STATIONS

The early growth of the church was driven by the establishment of strategically located mission stations. Rather than functioning solely as places of worship, these institutions combine schools, churches, agricultural programs, and basic medical services. This holistic approach reflected the Adventist philosophy of mission and enabled the church to respond to both the spiritual and practical needs of local communities. One of the earliest expansions beyond Malamulo was the establishment of Thambani Mission near the Mozambique border. Organized in 1929, Thambani became an important center for evangelism and education in southern Nyasaland. During the same period, Thekerani Mission was opened in the Shire Valley, extending Adventist influence into previously unentered territory. Reports from church leaders noted that local chiefs frequently requested additional teachers and mission schools, recognizing the educational benefits these institutions brought to their communities. The construction of schools and prayer houses in response to these requests reflected the positive relationship that developed between Adventist missionaries and many traditional leaders. The church also expanded along the shores of Lake Malawi. In 1934, Chief Njolomane granted land for the establishment of Lake View Mission, creating a new center for evangelism in the northern lakeshore region. Under African leadership, particularly that of Roman Chimera, the mission developed rapidly through the establishment of schools, churches, and outreach ministries. Later administrators continued to strengthen the work among the Tumbuka- and Tonga-speaking populations, making Lake View one of the denomination's most influential northern mission stations.<sup>15</sup>

## GROWTH IN NORTHERN MALAWI

Expansion into northern Nyasaland represented one of the most significant developments in the church's history. Missionaries recognized that many communities in the north had little contact with Protestant denominations and therefore presented new opportunities for evangelism. Mission stations such as Luwazi, Lunjika, Igghembe, and Chambo became centers for educational and evangelistic work. Schools established at these stations trained teachers, Bible workers, and church leaders who later served throughout the country. Reports published in denominational periodicals described rapid church growth as schools multiplied, and new congregations were organized. The emphasis on education enabled the church to establish long-term relationships with surrounding communities while preparing local leadership for the future expansion of the denomination. The success of the northern missions also demonstrated the increasing role of African workers in the advancement of the church. Evangelists, teachers, and pastors from Malawi assumed growing leadership responsibilities as the denomination expanded into previously unreached regions. Their ministry strengthened the church's ability to communicate the Adventist message within diverse linguistic and cultural settings.<sup>16</sup>

Education remained the principal means through which the Seventh-day Adventist Church expanded during the first half of the twentieth century. Mission schools provided literacy, vocational training, Bible instruction, and teacher preparation while also serving as centers of community development. By integrating education with evangelism, the church established a network of institutions that produced many of the country's early Adventist leaders. Unlike many colonial educational systems that offered limited opportunities for Africans, Adventist schools sought to prepare students for both Christian service and productive community life. Agricultural instruction, manual labor, and practical skills formed an important part of the curriculum, reflecting the denomination philosophy of holistic education. By the 1960s, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had expanded well beyond its mission stations. Increasing urbanization encouraged the church to adopt new methods of evangelism, particularly public evangelistic campaigns in towns and cities. Under leaders such as J. M. Staples, city-wide campaigns were conducted in Blantyre and other urban centers, resulting in the establishment of new congregations and a broader geographical distribution of Adventist membership. During the 1970s, union evangelists including H. P. Longwe, J. H. Masoka, and other national leaders further strengthened the church's evangelistic outreach through coordinated campaigns across Malawi. These developments marked an important transition from mission-centered expansion to conference-based evangelism led increasingly by Malawian workers. By the mid-twentieth century the Seventh-day Adventist Church had become firmly established throughout Malawi. Its expanding network of mission stations, schools, churches, and trained national leaders laid the organizational and spiritual foundation for the remarkable membership growth that would characterize the latter decades of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

## Educational, Medical, and Community Ministries

From its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi understood mission as encompassing the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social dimensions of human life. Consequently, education and healthcare developed alongside evangelism and became defining features of the church's contribution to Malawian society. The mission stations established during the first half of the twentieth century functioned not only as centers of worship but also as institutions of learning, medical care, agricultural development, and community service. Education occupied a central place in the missionary philosophy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Following the establishment of Malamulo Mission in 1902, schools were opened both at the mission headquarters and in surrounding villages to provide literacy, vocational training, and Christian instruction. Under the leadership of J. C. Rogers and his successors, numerous village schools were established, creating opportunities for children and young adults to receive formal education at a time when educational opportunities were limited in many rural areas. <sup>18</sup>

The educational program combined academic instruction with practical training in agriculture, manual skills, and Christian service. This approach reflected the Adventist philosophy of holistic education, which sought to develop intellectual, spiritual, physical, and moral capacities. Schools also served as centers for evangelism by preparing teachers, evangelists, and church leaders who later contributed to the expansion of Adventist work throughout Malawi. As the church expanded, mission schools were established at Thambani, Lake View, Luwazi, Chambo, and other mission stations. These institutions became important centers for literacy and leadership development and strengthened the relationship between the church and local communities. Requests from traditional leaders for additional schools and teachers demonstrated the confidence many communities placed in Adventist education. Medical ministry formed another important aspect of the church's witness in Malawi. From the earliest years of Malamulo Mission, healthcare was integrated into evangelistic outreach. Trained nurses were assigned to mission stations to provide basic medical services, health education, and preventive care to surrounding communities. These efforts addressed pressing healthcare needs while demonstrating the church's commitment to the well-being of the population. <sup>19</sup>

The medical work that began at Malamulo eventually developed into Malamulo Adventist Hospital, one of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's most significant healthcare institutions in Malawi. Over the years, the hospital expanded its services, becoming widely recognized for its contributions to clinical care, public health, and the training of healthcare professionals. Through its emphasis on compassionate service, the institution has continued to embody the Adventist philosophy of the healing ministry of Christ. Agriculture was an essential component of Adventist mission strategy in Malawi. Mission stations-maintained farms that supplied food for missionaries, students, patients, and surrounding communities while providing practical agricultural training. Reports from the early twentieth century describe successful dairy farming, livestock production, and crop cultivation at Malamulo Mission, where agricultural income contributed to the financial sustainability of the mission. Beyond economic benefits, agricultural programs served educational and humanitarian purposes. Students acquired practical skills that enhanced rural livelihoods, while improved farming methods introduced

through mission stations contributed to community development. This integration of education, agriculture, and Christian witness reflected the Adventist understanding of holistic mission.<sup>20</sup>

The combined ministries of education (see [Malawi Adventist University](#)), healthcare, and community development significantly influenced the growth and public reputation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi. Mission schools produced many of the country's early Adventist teachers, pastors, and administrators, while medical institutions extended healthcare to populations with limited access to government services. Community outreach through agriculture, literacy, and health education strengthened relationships with local leaders and facilitated the expansion of the church into new regions. These ministries demonstrated that the Adventist mission in Malawi extended beyond church planting. By addressing educational, medical, and social needs, the church contributed to national development while advancing its religious mission.<sup>21</sup>

## Organizational Development and Church Growth (1902–Present)

The organizational development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi closely paralleled the expansion of its evangelistic, educational, and medical ministries. During its earliest years, the work in Nyasaland was administered through the missionary structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in southern Africa. As membership increased and mission stations multiplied, the church gradually established administrative units that enabled more effective coordination of evangelism, education, healthcare, and pastoral ministry. Following the establishment of Malamulo Mission in 1902, the Adventist work in Nyasaland remained under the supervision of church leadership based in southern Africa. Mission directors stationed at Malamulo were responsible not only for the headquarters but also for the growing network of schools, churches, and outstations throughout the territory. As additional mission stations were opened, administrative responsibilities expanded correspondingly, requiring greater coordination among missionaries and the increasing number of Malawian evangelists, teachers, and pastors. The rapid growth of the church during the first half of the twentieth century reflected the effectiveness of this mission-based structure. Educational institutions, healthcare ministries, and evangelistic outreach complemented one another and contributed to the establishment of strong congregations in both rural and urban communities. The development of indigenous leadership further strengthened the church by enabling local pastors and administrators to assume increasing responsibility for mission and church administration.<sup>22</sup>

As Adventist membership continued to increase after Malawi attained independence in 1964, the church expanded beyond its original mission-station model. Public evangelistic campaigns, urban church planting, and the appointment of national evangelists accelerated membership growth throughout the country. Leaders such as J. M. Staples, H. P. Longwe, and J. H. Masoka played significant roles in strengthening evangelistic outreach and establishing congregations in major towns and cities. Their ministry reflected the transition from a church primarily centered on rural mission stations to one with a broader national presence. This expansion required

the church to reorganize its administrative structures. Mission territories were progressively organized into conferences with defined geographical boundaries and elected leadership. These organizational developments facilitated more effective pastoral supervision, financial administration, educational oversight, and strategic planning for evangelism.<sup>23</sup>

Continued membership growth eventually resulted in the establishment of the Malawi Union Conference, headquartered in Lilongwe. The Union became responsible for coordinating the work of local conferences, educational institutions, healthcare ministries, and supporting organizations throughout the country. As part of the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division (SID), the Union works in partnership with the General Conference and the Division to advance the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi. By 2025, the Malawi Union Conference comprised five local conferences: [Central Malawi Conference](#), [North Malawi Conference](#), East Malawi Conference, Southeast Malawi Conference, and Southwest Malawi Conference. The reorganization of the former [South Malawi Conference](#) into three new conferences reflected the continued expansion of the church and the need to provide more effective pastoral care and administrative support for a growing membership. The growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi has been remarkable. Beginning with a single mission station at Malamulo in 1902, the church expanded steadily through evangelism, education, medical ministry, and community development. By 2025, the Malawi Union Conference reported approximately 763,936 baptized members worshiping in 1,719 organized churches, making Malawi one of the largest Adventist memberships within the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division. This growth has been supported by the dedication of missionaries, national church leaders, pastors, teachers, healthcare professionals, literature evangelists, and thousands of lay members who have contributed to the advancement of the Adventist mission throughout the country. The increasing participation of Malawian leadership in every level of church administration has ensured that the church continues to respond effectively to the social, cultural, and spiritual needs of the nation. Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi operates a broad network of churches, schools, healthcare institutions, and community outreach programs. These ministries continue the holistic mission established by the pioneers at Malamulo more than a century ago. Through evangelism, Christian education, healthcare, humanitarian service, and leadership development, the church remains committed to proclaiming the gospel while contributing to the well-being of Malawian society.<sup>24</sup>

## Challenges, Legacy, and Future Mission

Throughout its history, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi has experienced remarkable growth while navigating a variety of social, economic, and institutional challenges. From its beginnings at Malamulo Mission in 1902, the church has expanded into one of the largest Adventist communities within the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division. This growth has been sustained through the combined efforts of missionaries, national church leaders, educators, healthcare professionals, literature evangelists, and lay members who have remained committed to the church's mission of proclaiming the gospel and serving society. Like many Christian

denominations operating within developing economies, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi continues to face challenges related to economic conditions, infrastructure, and access to remote communities. Large portions of the membership reside in rural areas where transportation remains difficult, particularly in districts surrounding Lake Malawi and other geographically isolated regions. These logistical realities affect pastoral visitation, educational access, and the delivery of church programs. Rapid urbanization also presents new opportunities and challenges. As Malawi's major cities continue to expand, the church is increasingly called upon to strengthen its presence in urban centers while maintaining its long-established ministry in rural communities. Balancing these priorities remains an important aspect of strategic planning for the Malawi Union Conference. The church likewise faces the broader challenges experienced by many Christian communities worldwide, including the need to retain young people, develop future leaders, strengthen stewardship, and respond to changing social and cultural contexts. Continued investment in Christian education, youth ministry, and leadership development will remain essential to sustaining the church's mission in the twenty-first century.<sup>25</sup>

The contribution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to Malawi extends beyond its numerical growth. Since the establishment of Malamulo Mission, the church has played an important role in promoting education, healthcare, literacy, agricultural development, and community service. Mission schools have educated generations of Malawians, while medical institutions—most notably Malamulo Adventist Hospital—have provided healthcare to thousands of patients. Through these ministries, the church has sought to demonstrate a holistic understanding of the Christian gospel by integrating evangelism with practical service. The development of indigenous leadership represents another significant achievement in the church's history. During the twentieth century, Malawian pastors, teachers, evangelists, administrators, and healthcare professionals increasingly assumed responsibility for the leadership and expansion of the church. Their commitment ensured that the Adventist message became firmly rooted within the cultural and social life of Malawi while maintaining its connection to the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

From the establishment of a single mission station at Malamulo in 1902, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown into one of Malawi's largest Protestant denominations. Its history reflects the combined influence of missionary dedication, African leadership, educational innovation, medical ministry, and faithful evangelism. As part of the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, the Malawi Union Conference continues to advance the mission of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church through the proclamation of the gospel, the promotion of Christian education, compassionate healthcare, and community service. More than a century after the establishment of Malamulo Mission, the church remains committed to its historic mission of preparing people for the soon return of Jesus Christ while contributing to the spiritual, educational, and social development of the nation.

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