



Alfred Matter, first from left.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist archives.

Adventist Church on Idjwi Island

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Idjwi, or Ijwi, is an island in Lake Kivu belonging to the Democratic Republic of Congo in the South Kivu Province, which is part of the territory of the North Eastern Congo Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. It covers an area of 340 square kilometers and is almost equidistant between DRC and Rwanda.¹ It has a population of about 290,000.²

The Beginning of the SDA Church on Idjwi Island

The beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Idjwi Island is traced to Mwami (King) Bera who, in 1935, fell sick and was admitted to Lingoma (now Mugonero) Hospital in Rwanda. There he met Jeremiah Barigura, an Idjwi islander refugee in Rwanda, who had been baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. King Bera was amazed by the Adventist culture of conducting an early morning worship service for the sick, before providing medical care, a practice which provided hope of recovery to the sick. King Bera was healed and, before he left the hospital, he begged Mr. Matter, a missionary from Belgium, to go and evangelize Idjwi Island. When Jeremiah Barigura returned to Idjwi, King Bera sent him back to contact the missionaries working at Lingoma/Rwanda and remind them of his invitation. On this occasion, Mr. Matter gave one of his white hens to Jérémie Barigura as a gift.³

Mr. Matter's First Visit to Idjwi

In 1942 Mr. Matter visited Idjwi for the very first time. He accosted a man named Maganga and asked to be taken to Busobe where Jeremiah Barigura lived. Mr. Matter saw a white hen and inquired about the owner because it was of the same breed as his chickens. When he arrived at Jeremiah's house, the greeting between the white man and a black man became an object of curiosity and several observers contemplated the presence of a white man in a black man's home. The following morning, Mr. Matter took advantage of the peoples' presence to tell them about Jesus. Taking into account the receptivity of the gospel message, Mr. Matter went back to Rwanda to organize a big evangelistic meeting.⁴

Mr. Matter and Four Evangelists Arrive in Idjwi

On October 20, 1942, Mr. Matter, accompanied by his son Alfred and four evangelists, namely, Iyamuremye Salathiel, Kalengera Berkimance, Daniel Kabagora, and Ntihinyurwa Aminadab, arrived to conduct an evangelistic campaign on the island. They focused on Malambo, the northern part of the island. The exercise was successful, though it was not without challenges, because most inhabitants of Idjwi Island are used to drinking banana beer and some were polygamous. It was not easy for them to stop those practices. Also, the new converts could neither read nor write.⁵

Literacy as an Evangelism Strategy

Apart from public evangelism, adult literacy training was used as another approach to evangelism. Four literacy sites were organized. Iyamuremye Salathiel was based in Busobe as a supervisor over his brothers who were to serve as both teachers and evangelists. They included Kalengera Berkimance in Busobe; Kabagora Daniel at Bukinanyana; Ntihinyurwa Aminadab in Kisheke, and Bizimana Daniel in Bweremata. This method resulted in

the establishment of a primary school with four classes. Many school children expressed a desire to move forward in their studies. Some decided to go to Lingoma/Rwanda where they attended the fifth and sixth grades. These included Rwegera Yohana, Hesroni Ruhahira, Maharhane Ezekiel, Mingingo Andre, and Yagoye Ruvugiro Seth, who states that he and his colleagues finished sixth grade in 1951. As soon as they returned to Idjwi, he was hired as a literature evangelist. Ngirente Murhalemwa worked hard as the first indigenous person to be appointed by the East Zaire Field as a primary school principal. He managed to organize the Adventist school system in Adjwi into two complete primary schools: Bukinanyana Primary School in Idjwi North and Lemera Primary School in Idjwi South. He also ensured that the required decrees to have the schools recognized and paid for by the Congolese government were in place by 1978.⁶

Evangelism in Karhongo (Idjwi-South)

Mr. Yagoye reports that towards the end of 1951, Lingoma Mission decided to evangelize Karhongo (Idjwi-South). Lingoma Mission sent a letter to Kalehe's administrator since Idjwi Island was part of Kalehe's administrative territory. The evangelistic campaign soon took place and all Bahavu-Lingoma graduates were appointed as teacher-evangelists, including Aaron Nyambwira Mukenge who had been appreciated for his ability to preach and teach well after graduating from Bukinanyana. Those who were recruited for the work in the south were Rwegera Mafurumba Yohana who went to Bwando; Hesron Ruhahira to Kambi; Maharhane Ezekiel to Kirutu; and Mingingo André to Nyabunyunyi. All teachers in the north and south were under the supervision of Pastor Iyamuremye Salathiel. Lingoma Mission had appointed Aaron Mukenge as the first evangelist who was an assistant to Pastor Iyamuremye.

Organization of Sectors into a District

According to Hamisi Mafuku, in 1952 the whole island of Idjwi became a district under the leadership of Pastor Iyamuremye Salathiel.

Towards the end of the same year, Pastor Iyamuremye was replaced by Pastor Bizimana Daniel, who chose Bukinanyana as the district headquarters. Pastor Bizimana was replaced by Pastor Rwanyabugigira.

Construction of the First Church by Missionaries

Missionaries from Lingoma/Rwanda voted to place the district headquarters in Bukinanyana for two reasons: Bukinanyana was in the middle of the evangelized territory in Idjwi-North; and it was also closer to the port where building materials could be deposited. Yagoye maintains that after moving Pastor Bizimana Daniel from Busole to Bukinanyana in 1952, the Lingoma missionaries began to bring building materials. The baked bricks and cement came from Cyanguu. Bukinanyana was the first Adventist church built of bricks. In 1978 the East

Zaire Field sent 150 sheets for roofing the brick church. The assignment of evangelists to different sites and the building of church structures were a success for the gospel work.

Anticipation of the 1960 Crisis

The 1960-1962 political movement that prevailed in the Great Lake Countries put an end to the gospel assistance of pioneers from Rwanda. In order to overcome this crisis, Yagoye Ruvugiro Seth was invited by Lingoma Mission in 1961 to take ministerial training in Gitwe. After this training, in 1962 Yagoye was appointed district director for Idjwi territory to replace Rwanyabugigira Aminadab. This district was detached from Rwanda when the Adventist Union Mission in Congo, with Lubumbashi as headquarters, authorized the Nyamitaba/North Kivu Mission to integrate the Idjwi district into its reports. Yagoye Ruvugiro oversaw the Idjwi district until 1966. He was replaced by Pastor Ephraim Gihamangabo. In an effort to find a solution to the crisis, a new team supported by the Nyamitaba Mission was sent to Rwanda for training in 1963. The team included André Ruvuduka Nkingi, Samuel Hamisi Mafuko, Elias Kanagarho Rivuzumwami, and Joseph Bashonga Mungwase. At the end of their training, they returned to Idjwi and all were assigned as teachers and evangelists at the same time. A few years later they were sent out of Idjwi as pastors.

Adventist Converts and Religious Marriage

According to Yagoye Ruvugiro, the religious marriage of young Adventist converts was appreciated by the Idjwi people. Kabarati and Phoebe were the first young people to be sent to Lingoma/Rwanda for the blessing of their marriage in 1945. Several other marriages were celebrated in Rwanda. From 1970 until 1980, Adventist weddings were blessed in Idjwi by a pastor from Masisi or Bukavu in former Zaire. The marriage between Ntamuhanga Bisengi and Nyabuhoro Vumilia was the first to be blessed by a native pastor, Hamisi Mafuku Samuel, in August 1981.

Ordination of Pastors from Idjwi Island

Church members on Idjwi Island remember the year 1942 as when Mr Matter reached the island, and 1981 as when the first indigenous pastors were ordained, namely: Ruvuduka André, Hamisi Mafuku Samuel, and Bihanda Bushebweka Uzziel. The second team to be ordained were Karutubusa Kabano Assiel and Bashonga Mungwase Joseph in 1991. Others that followed were: Kanagarho Rivuzumwami Elias, Kazase Nyambwira Zacharia Bashwira, Rubavu, Samuel Sinigenga, Muhigirwa Muhara, Mukanirwa Musangane, Kalimwabene Sezibera, Mundanilobe Nyambwira Truth, Kashinzwe Bigalagala Prudent, and Magala Tembea.⁷

Opening of a Medical Center as an Evangelistic Method

According to retired pastor, Bashonga Munwase, on the eve of Congo's independence, there was a separation between Congo and Rwanda when the South African Division based in Rhodesia had just made the decision to open a health center in Idjwi. Following this separation, it was decided to construct the clinic in Kinunu, Rwanda, instead. In 1974, Pastor Ruhaya was on the union committee in Lubumbashi and he took the opportunity to remind the committee members about the promise to build a health center in Idjwi territory. In 1976, Pastor Ruhaya visited Idjwi and had Bushonga voted as the location for the community clinic. In June 1977 the construction funds were released and placed under the supervision of the Idjwi district director, Pastor Mugabusheka Assiel. The district director was assisted by his evangelist, Bihanda Bushubweka. In 1978 the building was completed and Ntamuhanga Bisengi Issachar, who was better known for his good evangelical methods than for prescribing medical care, was brought in to supervise the health center. When he moved away, he was replaced by a nurse who had come from Rutchuru. Ntamuhanga Bisengi, now retired, is the only Adventist nurse from Idjwi. He is still strong and currently lives in Gisenyi, Rwanda.⁸

Seventh-day Adventist Church in Idjwi Today

The Idjwi territory received mission station status in 1999. This status was voted by a committee headed by Pastor Safari Bisika who was the South Kivu Field (SKF) president, and the first pastor to supervise it was Pastor Muyoboke Bariyanga Bosco, who was later replaced by Katoto Alembelembe, Ciza Zagabe, and Karimunda Mandari. During Karimunda Mandari's term, the Idjwi Mission Station was divided into two stations: Idjwi-North Station and Idjwi-South Station. Idjwi today has 40 organized churches and seven companies. The two stations have a membership of 6,778, according to the third quarter report for 2018.⁹ The Adventist Church now runs 48 schools, including 36 elementary schools and 12 secondary schools in the two stations.¹⁰

SOURCES

<http://www.idjwiisland.com/>. Accessed April 26, 2020.

<https://ewb-karlsruhe.de/dr-congo/projekthintergrund/region-sued-kivu/?lang=en> Accessed April 27, 2020.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, 2018. <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

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1. <http://www.idjwiisland.com/>. Accessed April 26, 2020.

2. <https://ewb-karlsruhe.de/dr-congo/projekthintergrund/region-sued-kivu/?lang=en>. Accessed April 27, 2020.

3. Yagoye Ruvugiro Seth, telephone interview with the author, January 6, 2018.
 4. The story was narrated to the author by Samuel Mafuku Hamisi on January 6, 2018, in Bukavu. Hamisi is a retired pastor from Idjwi Island.
 5. Yagoye Ruvugiro's testimony to Jeremiah Barigura, who narrated the story to the author in Bukavu on January 20, 2018.
 6. Ngirente Murhalemwa, personal testimony to the author, Bukavu, January 20, 2018.
 7. Samuel Sinigenga, interview with the author, Goma, June 15, 2018.
 8. Bashonga Munawase, interview with the author, Bukavu, January 20, 2018.
 9. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 2018.
 10. Personal knowledge of the author.
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