



Uganda Union Mission headquarters, Kampala, Uganda.

Photo courtesy of Daniel Matte.

Uganda Union Mission

ISRAEL M. KAFEERO

Israel M. Kafeero, Ph.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), is an assistant professor of practical theology at the Adventist University of Africa, Kenya. Previously, he served as executive secretary and as departmental director for the chaplaincy, youth, and children department of Uganda Union. He was also a lecturer at Bugema University's school of theology and religious studies.

Uganda Union Mission is a church administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda and is part of East-Central Africa Division.

Uganda Union Mission (UGUM) covers the country of Uganda, which has an area of 93,263 sq. mi. (241,551 km²). The country of Uganda is situated in the eastern part of Africa. It borders the Republic of Kenya on the east, the Republic of South Sudan on the north, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Tanzania on the west and south, respectively. It consists of seven local fields namely, Central Uganda Conference, Eastern Uganda Field, Northern Uganda Mission, Midwest Mission Station, Rwenzori Field, Western Uganda Field and Southwestern Uganda Field. It has a membership of 420,935, with 1,177 churches¹ out of a population of 40.2 million people.²

Organizational History

The Uganda Union was organized in 1987.³ Before then, it had been run as a local field of the East African Union with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. In 1982 the work was reorganized to create two fields in the country: Central Uganda Field and Western Uganda Field.⁴ The creation of a second field created some challenges when it came to who represented the church at official government functions and when the government wanted to consult the church because the presidents of the two fields were equal in status. Eventually the matter was taken to the union officers in Nairobi and the two fields were advised to form a joint committee so that the chairperson of the committee would be the church's representative and would be the one to present the committee's recommendation to the union and government if ever there was a need to do so.⁵

Besides the need for a collective administrative oversight, the work was growing and the union headquarters in Nairobi was a long way from the members in Uganda. The mission territory itself was large. The Western Uganda Field stretched from northern Uganda, on the border with South Sudan, to Tanzania and Rwanda in the south. The remaining part of the country comprised the Central Uganda Field. The territory was burgeoning in membership as many churches were being opened. For instance, in 1980 the membership stood at 13,632 with 102 churches.⁶ However, in 1985 just five years later membership shot to 42,091 worshipping in 176 churches which was more than three times the membership of the previous quinquennium.⁷ The 1980 Annual Statistical Report indicated that Uganda was still one field.⁸ The rapid growth led to prominent voices calling for the creation of a union in Uganda.

In 1985 the two local fields came together and wrote a formal request to the East African Union for union status in Uganda. In response, the union in Kenya sent a similar request to the leadership of the Eastern Africa Division in Harare, Zimbabwe. Pastor Aliddeki, retired church leader from the Uganda Union, recalls that the division sent a survey team comprised of Pastor Bekere Heye and Pastor Ndhilove. The two made recommendations in favor of organizing Uganda into a union. In 1986 a Survey Commission Report was approved by the General Conference Committee (384-86G).⁹ The same year, the GC Committee voted to send Dr. Jack Bohannon to Uganda on an expatriate budget to be the first president of Uganda Union.¹⁰ However, Pastor Aliddeki recalls that it was not until 1987 that the offices of the union were opened in Kampala, the capital of Uganda.¹¹

The first officers of Uganda Union Mission were Dr. Jack Bohannon the president and Mr. Livingstone Sebunya the secretary-treasurer.¹² The union started with four departments: 1) Youth, Publishing, and Spirit of Prophecy headed by Pastor Christian Aliddeki, 2) Stewardship, Sabbath School, and Lay Activities headed by Pastor Benezeri Bageni, 3) Education and Communication led by Dr. Hudson Kibuuka, and 4) Health and Temperance led by Dr. Sam Biraro.¹³ Departments have changed over the years. At present (2019) the union has nine departments and ministries: 1) Education and Women; 2) Children and Youth; 3) Communications, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL), and Missions; 4) Chaplaincy and Special Ministries; 5) Publishing, Spirit of Prophecy, and Home Health Education Services (HHES); 6) Stewardship and Trust Services; 7) Health and HIV/AIDS Desk; 8) Family Life and Ministerial Association; and 9) Evangelism, Sabbath School, and Lay Activities. The HIV/AIDS Desk, which was established by Pastor Kizito,¹⁴ sensitized communities through mainstreaming HIV/AIDS awareness in all activities of the church. This impacted the new union in its efforts to help the government fight this deadly disease. In the 80s and 90s, Uganda ranked high in the HIV/AIDS epidemic.¹⁵

Uganda Union was organized when the country was recovering from the civil war which had just ended. According to Pastor S. K. Sendawula, former president of the Central Uganda Field, the parent division and the worldwide church had sympathy for the new union.¹⁶ In addition, Dr. Samson Kisekka, an Adventist Prime Minister who later became the Vice President of the Republic of Uganda, and was an elder in Najjanankumbi one of the churches in the capital city of Kampala, boosted the popularity of the new union. In 1988, he addressed the worldwide church's Annual Council which was held in Nairobi, Kenya. Dr Samson Kisekka and Mrs. Kisekka were introduced along with his entourage by the President of the General Conference, Neal C Wilson who described him as one who embodied the ideals of Christian leadership.¹⁷ "Delbert Baker, editor of Message magazine, who had just completed a book on the life of Dr. Kisekka, was asked by Wilson to address the Annual Council."¹⁸

The new union was also impacted by a popular youth group called KIDAYO (Kampala Inter-District Adventist Youth Organization). Through the leadership of Mr. Steven Kabuye and his deputy Mrs. Sarah Nalwanga Kafeero (who later became chairperson), the church in Uganda was brought to the attention of the world church. During the General Conference Session of 1985 at New Orleans, KIDAYO was presented with a check for \$10,000 by Elder N. C. Wilson to enhance their evangelism activities. The Adventist Review of July 1985 reports that "The representative of a youth group from Kampala presented a portrait of the General Conference president to Elder Neal Wilson, and Wilson in turn gave the youth leader a check for \$10,000 to help finance youth evangelism in the Ugandan capital."¹⁹ Mrs. Kafeero recalls that they used that money to buy a bus. She says that the bus, which operated as public transportation, attracted many travelers due to the Christian music playing and the Bible verses printed inside.²⁰

The first headquarters of the union was at Plot 10, Kampala Road, Uganda House.²¹ At the time of the writing of this article, the address is Adventist Center, Gadafi Road, Opp LDC, Kampala, Uganda. The original postal address, which was 6434 Kampala, Uganda, has not changed. Pastor Aliddeki recalls that the reason the

headquarters moved from the original address to the one on Gadafi Road was due an increase in monthly rent. The current office facility was constructed by lay people to host a community center hall, a clinic (Adventist Medical Center), and a local church office (Kampala Central Church). The land on which the office is situated in the heart of Kampala was purchased by the Uganda Union with help from two church elders, Mr. E. Ssali and Mr. Antoni Tamale.²²

Since its inception, the union has continued to grow steadily. At its inauguration, the union had two fields with a total membership of 42,354 and 228 congregations.²³ Today, membership stands at 420,935. The original two fields have been reorganized into five missions and one conference. The Central Uganda Field was organized in 1927 and reorganized in 1982 and 1989, and became a conference in 2009.²⁴ The five fields/missions are: Western Uganda Field organized in 1982,²⁵ reorganized in 1987; Southwestern Uganda Field organized in 1987, reorganized in 1989; Eastern Uganda Field organized in 1989;²⁶ Rwenzori Field organized in 2012,²⁷ Southwestern Uganda Field organized in 2012,²⁸ and Northern Uganda Field organized in 2012.²⁹ At the time of the writing of this article, there are five institutions under the Uganda Union: Ishaka Hospital, Bugema University, Bugema Adventist Secondary School, Upper Nile Press and the Adventist Medical Center. There are two service organizations, Home Health Education Services that operates the Adventist Book Center, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

The membership growth of the union is attributed to union-wide evangelistic and mission programs that the church promoted over the years. In the early years of the union, an evangelist was employed to coordinate evangelistic efforts all over the union. The first union evangelist was Pastor Wakabi Awuye.³⁰ Also, starting in 2016, there was a division-wide evangelistic promotion called Total Member Involvement (TMI). This explains why membership increased by 56,929 between 2016 and 2018.³¹

Through ADRA Uganda, the union has been involved in humanitarian programs and initiatives throughout the country since 1987.³² ADRA Uganda works closely with local leaders, community-based groups, and civil organizations to promote sustainable livelihood programs for impoverished Ugandans. "To achieve success, ADRA Uganda continually sought to improve their programs in food security, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), HIV/AIDS, malaria, and advocacy and capacity building."³³ ADRA's biggest support partner is Sweden. In 2018, Sweden supported one of ADRA's largest emergency projects with a total of almost US\$700,000.³⁴ In 2019, ADRA secured a project from the World Food Program (WFP) to distribute food assistance to refugee camps in Western Uganda.³⁵ According to the report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of February 2019, Uganda was the third largest refugee-hosting country in the world with a total of 1,223,003 refugees.³⁶

With a membership of 197,437,³⁷ the Central Uganda Conference comprises 60.7 percent of the total membership of the union. By 2019, this conference was contributing a significant amount of support in terms personnel and finances to the Uganda Union. Rwenzori field was the fastest growing field with 21 percent of the

total number of churches in the union.³⁸ Union growth is attributed to a dedicated workforce, cooperative laity, and especially the Women's Ministries Department. The challenging region for evangelism was the northern part of the union that stretches from the eastern border with Kenya to the western border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. The western part of this region was occupied by Muslims. The majority of the people in the central and the eastern parts were Catholics. Furthermore, the eastern part is home to the nomadic Karamajong ethnolinguistic groups. In 2019 this area of eight political districts³⁹ had only three SDA congregations.

The organization of the church in Uganda as a union helped bring services closer to the members and in turn resulted in significant growth as demonstrated above. The mission of the church to reach the people is being progressively realized. The Uganda Union is located in the center of the East-Central Africa Division (ECD). Economically, in 2019 the currency exchange rate for Uganda was lower than any other country in ECD. Also, Uganda has often been referred to as "the bread basket of Africa."⁴⁰ These factors have led to the country being favored by ECD for hosting division events such as youth camporees, conferences, and training seminars. At the time of writing this article, the union is organizing a division wide Mission Extravaganza event to be held in Kampala in January 2020.

Future Outlook

The union is dedicated to the mission of the SDA Church. It cooperates with the division on every initiative that promotes evangelism. It is anticipated that the Mission Extravaganza in Kampala will highlight the church's evangelistic achievements. The union was organized when Bugema was just a college. Today, it is a chartered university offering many programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The ministry continues to get personnel who are trained at a degree level unlike the past when certificate holders made up the majority of pastors. Ishaka Hospital runs a nursing school that continues to do well. The division's image change initiative has taken root in the union and continues to improve the image of the church and the quality of services. The growth of the church has been steady for the last ten years and there is every reason to believe it will continue.

Executive Officers Chronology

Presidents: Jack B. Bohannan (1987-1989); S. Kyambadde (1991-1995); Christian Aliddeki (1996-2000); John Wani (2001-2009); John Kakembo (2009-2014); Daniel Matte (2014-present). Secretaries: Mr. Sebunya (1987-1988); Difers. I. Issabirye (1988-1990); Nathaniel M. Walembe (1991-1995); John Wani (1996-2005); Joseph Twesigye (2006-2010); Daniel Matte (2011-2014); Israel Kafeero (2014-2019). Treasurers: Mr. Sebunya (1987-1998); Mrs. Doris Jorgensen (1999-2000); Tegete Adugnaw (2000-2003); Elizabeth Kigongo (2003-2006); Mr. Diosdado Largosa (2006-2009); Frank Kiggundu (2009- present).⁴¹

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