



Central Malawi Conference office, Lilongwe, the Republic of Malawi.

Photo courtesy of Brian S. B. Chafunya.

# Central Malawi Conference

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## BRIAN STONECK BENARD CHAFUNYA

Brian Stoneck Benard Chafunya, M.A. (Adventist University of Africa, Mbagathi, Nairobi, Kenya), currently (2020) serves as the executive secretary of Central Malawi Conference. Chafunya began his ministerial work in 1998 and was ordained to the gospel ministry in 2003. Prior to becoming the conference executive secretary, Chafunya served as a pastor in seven districts within the conference.

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Central Malawi Conference is a subsidiary church administrative unit of the Malawi Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists.

Central Malawi Conference is located in the central region of the Republic of Malawi, with headquarters in the capital city, Lilongwe. The conference offices are situated along Kenneth Kaunda Road in Area 49. The Central Malawi Conference territory covers an area of 35,592 km<sup>2</sup>. As of the 2018 demographic census, the central territory had a population of 7,523,340 people<sup>1</sup>.

The conference has a membership of 100,294 in 348 organized churches and 584 companies. There are 48 ordained ministers and 11 licensed pastors. Chichewa is the most dominant language spoken in the conference territory, and also the nation's official language. The Chewa speaking people are the most dominant tribe in the region, although there are also small groups of the Yao, Tumbuka, and Ngoni people.

## Origin of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Region

Prior to the opening of the work in the central region of Malawi, many young men of the Ngoni tribe went from Ntcheu and Dedza districts to attend school at Malamulo Mission in the southern part of the country. When they returned to their homes, they shared the Adventist message with their own people.<sup>2</sup> For a long time Adventists in Blantyre prayed for the start of mission work in Ngoniland. In answer to their prayer, Dr W. C. Dunscombe, an American physician who served at the Cape Sanitarium and had passed through the central region in 1915, donated funds for opening the work.

Adventism entered the central region around 1934.<sup>3</sup> Elders Watson, J. F. Wright, E. C. Boger, and H. M. Sparrow responded to a call from Paramount Chief Gomani of Ngoniland, and went to view a site where a future mission station, Lake View Mission, would be opened.<sup>4</sup>

Later, Dr Dunscombe wrote a letter to H. M. Sparrow, superintendent of the South East African Union, in which he enclosed 500 pounds to help open a new mission in the central region. Then 100 acres of land was secured from the government in the Kirk Range, at an altitude of 6,000 feet above sea level, along the Great North Highway.

H. M. Sparrow and Dr. George E. Marcus personally visited the place and spoke to the Administrator or Chief Secretary of the capital city of Zomba in 1936. Permission to open the school was finally granted toward the end of that year.<sup>5</sup> Pastor Roman Chimera, who became the director of the new mission in the central region, was sent from the southern region in 1936.<sup>6</sup> From 1936 to 1958, the Lake View Mission school provided education only as far as standard IV.<sup>7</sup> The first fruits of the new mission were realized in the baptism of 33 people during that year's camp meeting.

In the city of Lilongwe, Pastor Chimera visited some of the village headmen where people were calling for Seventh-day Adventist schools. He reached chief George Kalonga's village, which had refused an offer from someone who wanted to start a mission of another denomination, because they wanted Seventh-day Adventist schools like the one at Lake View. Four years later they opened a school known as George School with 80 children.<sup>8</sup> During the seven years Pastor Chimera served in the central region, he left six schools, including the Lake View mission station, as well as 500 baptized members. However, three of the schools were not running by 1945 due to a shortage of teachers. Under the leadership of good head teachers, however, the school at Lake View Mission operated with an enrollment of 140 pupils.

In 1946, Pastor Chimera was moved to Thekerani Mission, and was replaced by Pastor Ben Ritch as director. A year later, in 1947, J. W. Haarhoff was appointed to head the mission as the first European director in a program of expanding the stations in the country. He arrived in May 1948, after completing his furlough in Cape Town.<sup>9</sup> Other European missionaries shunned the Adventists, and encouraged the local people to shun them too. One colporteur was thrown into a chief's prison for erecting a small prayer house where Adventists could worship. Wherever schools could not be opened because of opposition, they opened prayer houses under strong lay leadership. This increased the membership from fifty to over three hundred, and three churches were organized in that area in 1948. Ten years later, membership had grown from 300 to over 1500. In 1958 alone, they baptized 200 new members.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere, in 1939, a man called Mr. Kaliyopa was diagnosed with leprosy. He went to Mwami Mission Leper Colony in Northeast Rhodesia (Zambia) for medication. He came back in 1944 with a new teaching of Adventism, and shared his newfound faith with the people around his home area in Lilongwe. He was then given land in 1944 at M'bwatalika, which became M'bwatalika Mission station. It was here that Pastor S. S. Hiten baptized seven people on July 15, 1947.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in 1949 a young licensed pastor named Time Nkumbira was stricken with leprosy. He too went to Mwami Mission Leper Colony. Through the prayers of church members, he was restored to health and accepted the invitation to go back to Lake View Mission station. Following his full recovery, he was ordained to the gospel ministry and worked as a chaplain to patients confined in the leper colony.<sup>12</sup>

Medical work in the central region was started through another financial donation from Dr. Dunscombe. Toward the end of 1950, Alexander Nyambi was sent to Lake View to start medical work by opening a dispensary. More equipment was added later. In 1954, he returned to Malamulo Mission Hospital for a refresher course, and his wife took the midwifery course. Their replacements, Harry Kabula, a hospital orderly, and his wife Lucy, a midwife, arrived at Lake View Mission in October 1954, where she started a maternity work.<sup>13</sup>

Later in 1983, Mr. Katapa also came from the south. He was a medical assistant who began working at Bottom Hospital in Lilongwe. Being an Adventist, he opened a "prayer house" in his house and congregated with two students. He was later joined by another family. Later, Katapa was transferred to Zomba, and the people he left started worshipping at Falls Church in Lilongwe, which later became the hub of Adventism in the capital city.

According to village headman Chilumika, Pastor Mathews Khanganya was the Adventist pioneer who took the Adventist message to the northern part of the central region, Kasungu district in particular. Nevertheless, Adventism did not experience significant growth in the central region. Challenges included:

*Tobacco growing.* Tobacco is the number one cash crop grown by the people of the central region. The crop fetches a lot of money on the market, and it has been an obstacle to Adventism's growth. A lot of people have understood the Adventist message but not joined the church because of the church's stance against tobacco usage.

*Gule wamkulu*. This is a traditional cult, associated with evil spirits. It is dominant among the Chewa people and has been there since time immemorial. The Chewa people believe that *Gule wamkulu* binds them together and gives them their identity. The cult is violent in behavior, and forces many people, especially men, to be initiated into it. Its violence and association with evil spirits makes it difficult for people to join the Adventist church.

However, church schools were opened at Santhe in Kasungu district, Saiwa, and Tambala in Ntcheu district of the central region to help spread the message.

## Organization of Central Lake Field

There were initially two fields in Malawi (South Lake Field and North Lake Field). The Central Lake Field was organized in 1964.<sup>14</sup> In the course of that time, the southern region had been split into two fields, South Lake Field and Ruo Field. For easy administration, the South East African Union, under the leadership of Pastor Norman L. Doss, decided to close the Ruo Field and transfer its administration to a newly created Central Lake Field, with headquarters at Dedza. Pastor E. J. Zintambira became the first field director.

During the one-party rule period in Malawi, only the country's president, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, was permitted to be called "President." Even the names of the fields were designated by their region, and the "Lake" due to political reasons, as the name "Malawi" was also protected.

The church in the central region was however not growing much. The major challenges were finances and church attendance.

Finances were not enough to support the gospel work. For instance, Pastor Malopa reports that there were times when workers would go for two to three months without getting paid.<sup>15</sup> Because of this problem, Pastor Fred Wilson, the then Union Director, proposed to close the Central Lake Field in 1977, though this was not carried out.

According to Pastor Dick Jonathan Nkosi's report, in the years just after Malawi got her political independence, Saturday was regarded as a working day, and Adventist members could not attend the worship services in the morning. Malawi's President, Dr. Banda, appointed Mr. Mkandawire, Principal of Lunjika Secondary School, one of the Seventh-day Adventist secondary schools in Malawi, to be a District Commissioner.<sup>16</sup> Mkandawire approached Dr. Banda and asked him to declare Saturday a day off from work in Malawi. Dr Banda accepted the request. In 1982 Saturday was declared a public holiday, and from then on, the church started growing.

The other factor that contributed to the growing of Adventism in the Central Malawi Conference was the opening of Lakeview Seminary in 1980, at Njolomole Village, the location of Lakeview Mission. Previously, pastors were sent to Solusi College in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe. Due to limited finances, however, Malawi Union Mission could not send many people for ministerial training. The opening of Lakeview Seminary contributed to

the growth of the church in central region as more and more pastors that graduated with ministerial diplomas. The first graduation was conducted in 1982, with nine graduates. The increase in pastors helped to reduce geographical areas assigned to each pastor.

In 1991, Central Lake Field opened its own secondary school. Many students embraced Adventism before graduating as a result of convocation weeks of spiritual emphasis. A few years later, another secondary school was opened at Mbwatalika Mission.

In 1994, after the political situation in the country improved, Central Lake Field's name was changed to Central Malawi Field. Meanwhile, the church continued growing steadily, both numerically and financially. Then, due to the absence of banking and internet services at Dedza, the Field Executive Committee voted to move the headquarters of Central Malawi Field to Lilongwe, where communication and financial institutions were available.<sup>17</sup>

## Organisation of the Central Malawi Conference

After several years of financial and membership growth, Central Malawi Field was organized into a conference on August 11, 2008. This followed the recommendation of the Field Executive Committee taken June 11, 2007,<sup>18</sup> and the approval of both Malawi Union Mission and the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division Executive Committees.

The finances of the Central Malawi Conference have continued to grow. For the eleven months of 2019, tithe income received amounted to 1,447,141,802.00 Malawi Kwacha and mission offerings amounted to 311,000,000 Malawi Kwacha, which translates into US\$ 1,929, 521.37 in tithes and US\$414, 666.67 in mission offerings, according to the financial report of the Central Malawi Conference presented in Lilongwe on December 12, 2019.<sup>19</sup>

## List of Presidents

E. Jonas Zintambira (1964–1970); Saul Samuel (1971–1977); N. Y. Nkosi (1977–1980); W. W. Katundu (1981–1984); Daniel W. Kapitao (1985–1990); Winford Mapiko (1991–1993); Benford Malopa (1994–1997); Elias Phonela (1997–1998); Hopeson Bonya (1999–2000); Ronald Kanjira (2001–2002); Frackson Kuyama (2003–2007); Joe Gumbala (2007–2008); Ronald Kanjira (2008–2011); Innocent Chikomo (2011–2014); John A. G. Phiri (2014–2019); Petro Sukali (2019–Present).

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