



Namibia North Conference office.

Photo courtesy of Kashasha Matamu.

# Namibia North Conference

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Namibia North Conference is a subsidiary church administrative unit of the Southern Africa Union Conference in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

## Current Territory and Statistics

Namibia North Conference's territorial regions lie north of the Red Line, also referred to as the Veterinary Cordon Fence (VCF). These regions consist of Kavango East, Kavango West, Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana, Zambezi, and Oshikoto Region (North from Oshivelo). The current statistics (June 30, 2020), are as follows: Churches, 100; Membership, 17, 110; Population, 1,919,980.

## Origin of Adventist Work in the Namibia North Conference

## Northeast Territory (Formerly Caprivi Strip)

The first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to arrive in Namibia (then known as German South-West Africa) was William Harrison "Harry" Anderson (1870-1950). Anderson was an American Adventist missionary who came to Africa in 1895 and was passionate about missionary work. He arrived in Namibia in 1920 following the Macedonian call made by Chief Chikamatondo in 1918, through the British authorities at Kasanse in Botswana. The chief resided in the north-eastern part of Namibia that was called "Der Caprivi Zipfel," known in English as "Caprivi's Fingertip" or just "Caprivi Strip." The call was made through the British authorities, but for some unknown reasons, "for two years, God kept the mouth of British authorities closed until W. H. Anderson was available."<sup>1</sup> When word reached Anderson, he learned that 100 Sabbath keepers in the uncharted territory of German South-West Africa were calling for help.<sup>2</sup> Elder Anderson left the following week from Mafikeng, South Africa, where he was residing at the time to meet with Chief Chikamatondo. He also visited a number of other chiefs in the territory and made arrangements for Seventh-day Adventists to come and develop the territory.<sup>3</sup>

During Anderson's first missionary visit to Namibia, Chief Chikamatondo appealed to him that as he went back, he should send more missionaries to teach the people about God. Anderson left with a resolve in his heart to open the work in Namibia.<sup>4</sup> True to his promise, Anderson "made arrangements for two African teachers to open up schools"<sup>5</sup> in the Caprivi Strip territory, to serve as the entry wedge amongst the indigenous people. Thus, Anderson sent his colleague, J. V. Wilson, to take the two African teachers, Henry Mabona and Nathan Kabunda, from Rusangu Mission where missionary work was already at an advanced stage.

After they established a school, the gospel was preached to the community and, consequently, growth was realized, as recorded in the various minutes of the Zambezi Union Mission starting from 1922. In that same year, Gilbert Willmore left the Belgian Congo, where he was working at the Songa Mission, to go to pioneer the mission work in the Caprivi Strip. He traveled more than one hundred sixty kilometers (100 miles) by bicycle crossing thirteen rivers, many of which flowed through deep gullies.<sup>6</sup> In such instances trees that were large enough were cut and made to fall across the ravines to function as an improvised bridge. The travelers placed their bicycles on their shoulders and their goods on their heads and used balancing techniques to cross over. The rest of the journey was made by train to Rusangu Mission, where Willmore met Nevil Bulgin and Pastor J. V. Wilson, who accompanied him to the Caprivi Strip. Willmore and Bulgin were sent to work full time in that territory to arrange for the establishment of a permanent mission.<sup>7</sup>

From Rusangu, the journey to Katima Mulilo was made by canoes up large rivers including the Zambezi, and the final lap of the journey was made by foot. They traveled from village to village and purchased food from the natives such as mealie-meal, cassava meal, beans, and different kinds of milk from their cattle.<sup>8</sup> The treacherous journey concluded with plodding along deep, slippery, hot sands. When the missionary team arrived in Katima Mulilo in 1922, they were treated kindly by the natives. When they found an area they deemed suitable for setting up a mission, they notified the Zambesi Union Mission office in Bulawayo, Rhodesia. Not long afterward,

Elder William H. Branson, president of the African Division, and Professor W. E. Straw, superintendent of the Zambesi Union Mission, arrived in Caprivi Strip to inspect the place, and they decided that it was suitable for a mission site.<sup>9</sup>

Bulgin did not stay very long before he left to work elsewhere. Willmore and his wife held meetings from village to village and established two missionary schools, apart from the school that was started in Ikaba, Chief Chikamatonda's village. Another way the Willmores managed to win the confidence of the villagers was to treat their wounds and illnesses.<sup>10</sup> Sabbath services were conducted underneath a large tree, with attendees coming from far. Longone, a Zulu man, served as the first interpreter for the Willmores.

God also provided a well-versed English speaking native from Barotseland, named Ishee Nyuwe Akabeswa Imasiku, to assist the Willmores with their teaching. He arrived offering his services to interpret for them. At that time there were no funds to afford his service. However, the need for his assistance was big, and the Willmores concluded that he must be God-sent. They agreed on a wage and employed him to help them in the schools. The Willmores invited him for their morning worship since he understood English very well. He became very interested in the Advent truth, was soon baptized, and he went on to visit many villages creating new interest.

Illness caused Willmore to move to the South African coast in 1923 where he spent three years recuperating. Afterward he returned to Rusangu Mission from where he had been sent to pioneer the work in Caprivi Strip. Elder Samuel Konigsmacher replaced him at Katima Mulilo. After they had settled at Katima Mulilo, the Konigsmachers desired to go, in 1928, to Barotseland instead and the Willmores became stationed at Katima Mulilo for a second time.

This time the mission started to help people with food. The plots of land around the mission were cultivated, and mealies and pumpkins were given to the people. In one year, 600 pumpkins were given out. Willmore wrote: "In an endeavor to help the people materially, lessons were given in how to cultivate the soil and plant the grain."<sup>11</sup>

The work in this territory was often strengthened with camp meetings of which the highlights were baptisms in the Zambezi River. Willmore explains: "Camp meetings were always something for which to look forward to, for the attendance was an indication of the progress the work was making in different sections of the territory."<sup>12</sup> The people loved to sing at camp meetings, until they had to be stopped at 11:00 p.m. so that they could sleep to be able to stay awake in the meetings during the day. Camp meetings were often attended by leading evangelists from the Zambezi Union Mission, whose preaching revived the hearts of the attendees.

In 1931 L. L. Moffitt and J. R. Campbell joined C. E. Wheeler, who was then acting superintendent of the Northern Rhodesia Mission Field. With Willmore they traveled up the Zambezi River after the Division Annual Council meeting that was held in Bulawayo that year. On the Sabbath afternoon, a large company gathered on the banks of the Zambezi River. Pastors Willmore and Imasiku baptized the candidates. "During the service, boys stood in a canoe with the long oars in the water, a little beyond the officiating ministers in order to keep the

crocodiles away,"<sup>13</sup> Moffit reported.

Medical treatments were also given at camp meetings. At the 1931 camp meeting, Mrs. Willmore gave about five hundred treatments as a medical missionary. Goitre, which was prevalent around Katima Mulilo at the time, along with sore eyes, ulcers, skin diseases, colds, headaches, and stomach troubles, were among the various ailments that were treated at the small dispensary on the camp-meeting grounds.<sup>14</sup> On one occasion, Dr. Hewes visited the camp meeting to provide medical help to camp-meeting attendees.

The increase in membership called for the building of places of worship. Currently there are many such places of worship. It must be mentioned that because of the political situation in Namibia prior to its independence in 1990, indigenous Black Namibians were segregated in such a way that the Caprivi Strip territory of Namibia North Conference belonged to the Zambezi Union Mission, while the Kavangoland and Owamboland belonged to the sister field called South West Africa Field (SWA Field) under the South African Union Mission. The mission work in Caprivi Strip was successful, and training was given "to the laity during the period known as Mission 73 to Mission 75, and during the period known as the period of harvesting,"<sup>15</sup> to equip them to carry on with evangelism in the Caprivi Strip, including caring for the existing churches and companies whilst the pastors and leaders of the Caprivi Strip Field focused on penetrating the next territory, the Kavangoland. By that time the leadership of the Caprivi Strip Field had successfully passed from the expatriate missionaries to the local people.

Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena, and Oshikoto Regions (formerly Owamboland)

The origin of mission work in the former Owamboland is also credited partly to W. H. Anderson. Upon his arriving in Namibia in 1922 enroute to Angola, he called upon the tribal chief to ask for permission to travel through Owamboland to his destination. Through God's providence, Anderson linked up with Mr. Hansen, who was also about to head for Angola. They teamed up, and it was during this two-week trip through Owamboland that Anderson made some contacts with the people and their chief. Like in the Caprivi Strip, these chiefs also requested for missionaries to come and assist them in educating their people. The specific tribe that they met were the Ndonga people.

During the following year, in 1923, a missionary by the name of Ovid Bredenkamp was sent to South-West Africa, and he engaged in language study, in preparation for opening the work among the Ndonga people. The work developed slowly, and by the time the Namibia North Conference was formed, the north region still had few organized churches.

Kavango East and West Regions (formerly Kavangoland)

The decision to enter Kavangoland was arrived at because of the Macedonian call that came through the few members from Caprivi Strip who were living in Rundu, the administrative headquarters of the Kavangoland. Additionally, the leaders from Caprivi Strip were well acquainted with the area and the need for the Advent message to enter the territory. The only concern was that the territory belonged to the sister field, and hence,

they would have to enter it with caution and tact. Mubonenwa cites the following statement of Ellen G. White as the basis of their motivation and encouragement to enter the territory:

We have a most solemn, testing message to give to the world. But too much time has been given to those who already know the truth. In the place of spending time on those who have been given many opportunities to learn the truth, go to the people who have never heard your message.<sup>16</sup>

After many prayers offered by the leaders of the Caprivi Strip Field, the president of the field, Pastor L. L. Mubonenwa, on January 8, 1981, wrote a letter to the president of the Trans-Africa Division<sup>17</sup> regarding the mission work in Namibia and the plan to enter the Kavangoland. The division president shared the content of the letter with the respective union leader, and permission was granted to enter the territory. The territory was officially entered on December 8, 1983, and two evangelistic campaigns were held thereafter as follow:

1. Rundu campaign was held during the period of October 7-28, 1984, resulting in the baptism of nine souls on January 26, 1985. These new souls were added to the group of about twenty members comprising Adventists from Caprivi Strip and Angolans who were residing in Rundu as refugees. Bartholomew Mungu Silawa was chosen as the first pastor for the group.
2. Bagani (now Divundu), which was the second territory in the Kavangoland, held its campaign during the period from August 10-25, 1984, and 131 people accepted Christ and 50 decided to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. From the first campaign conducted, mission work has grown, and two pastoral districts have been opened with the membership still growing.

## Organizational History of the Conference

The mission work in the Caprivi Strip was formally organized when the Southern Africa Division took a vote in 1951 to ask the Zambezi Union Mission to organize the work in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, the Caprivi Strip, and the Tati Concession into the Bechuanaland Mission Field with Elder M. M. Webster as president.<sup>18</sup> However, notable progress happened after Pastor Walter Cooks was elected as president of the Bechuanaland Mission Field on December 2, 1952.<sup>19</sup>

In 1972 Caprivi Strip became a mission station with local leaders making decisions that were ratified by the higher organization in Bulawayo. In the same year (1972), Pastor Cooks retired from active service, and his retirement brought about leadership crisis due to the political situation prevailing at that time. A vote was taken by the Zambesi Union Executive Committee on November 28, 1972, to state that Caprivi Strip would no longer be part of the Botswana Mission Field as from January 1, 1973, but that it should be administered directly from the Zambesi Union Mission office in Bulawayo as a detached mission.

At the Zambesi Union Mission session of September 1975, a vote was taken that the Caprivi Strip be organized into a mission field effective from January 1, 1976, with Pastor Eric M. Annandale as the first president. Membership at the time of organizing stood at 2,050. This arrangement did not last long due to political and logistical problems. In 1978 the Caprivi Strip Field Executive Committee took a vote to request the Zambezi Union to refer its request to the Trans-Africa Division for Caprivi Strip Mission to be transferred to the Southern Union Conference in Johannesburg.<sup>20</sup> The request was approved, and since January 1, 1982, the Caprivi Strip Field was a subsidiary organization of the Southern Union Conference. The Southern Union Conference was merged with the South African Union Conference in December 1991 to constitute the Southern Africa Union Conference that exists today.

Due to the expanding mission work to the west of the Caprivi Strip territory, the mission field was no longer administering work only in the Caprivi Strip but also Kavangoland, Tsumkwe, and other areas. The name Caprivi Strip was therefore no longer appropriate. A vote was taken by the Caprivi Strip Field Executive Committee to recommend to the Southern Africa Union Conference's mid-year executive committee meeting in Bloemfontein to change the name from Caprivi Strip to North-East Namibia Field. The request was approved on May 18, 1993. This new name was used until it was dissolved at the end of 1999, when the two fields in Namibia; namely, North East Namibia Field and South-West Africa Field, merged to form the Namibia Field with effect from January 1, 2000. The combined membership statistics for the newly organized Namibia Field totaled 12,232 members in 54 churches. A strategic plan was developed to ensure that mission work in Namibia grew until it attained conference status, and it eventually becomes a union conference, as well.

By 2012 the Namibia Field had realized its growth as stipulated by the strategic plan in terms of membership and the establishment of institutions, such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Namibia, Adventist World Radio (AWR) Namibia, clinics, and schools. In September 2012 the Namibia Field was organized into Namibia Conference with 80 churches and 12,806 members. The next step, as per its strategic plan stipulation, was the attainment of union conference status. The Namibia Conference, however, could not achieve such in the planned timeline because a union requires at least two conferences or a conference and a field. Hence, the Namibia Conference was advised to realign into two conferences, then apply for union status at a later stage. The Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, therefore, took a vote to realign the Namibia Conference into two organizations; namely, the North Namibia Conference and South Namibia Conference, with effect from January 1, 2016. At a North Namibia Conference session that took place on September 26-28, 2019, a vote was taken to change the name to Namibia North Conference.

## Future Outlook

With regard to Namibia North Conference's future outlook,

... [I]f the Lord delays His coming, Namibia should just work very hard to be able to operate three fields. One in Windhoek, the other in Oshakati, and also in Katima Mulilo. In fact, two offices are already available: one in Katima Mulilo and the other in Windhoek. Then it can be organized into Namibia Union.<sup>21</sup>

This vision of the leaders of yesteryear is still the vision that the church is carrying on in the territory of Namibia. It is their desire, by God's grace, to be organized into a union conference. It is their belief that the experience that they have accumulated over the years of working with sister countries in forging the mission work and the challenges that come with being administered from distant areas is assisting them in working hard to bring the administration of God's work closer. Institutions such as ADRA, AWR, schools, and medical centers are being nurtured to support the mission work in this territory of Namibia. The two sister conferences in the territory of Namibia are working closely and collaborating on a lot of things to ensure that they do not delay the realization of their vision of becoming a union conference longer than necessary. The Namibia North Conference has already taken a decision to start working on the third mission station in the Oshakati area with the plan of growing the station into a field or conference.

## List of Presidents

Caprivi Strip Field: Eric M. Annandale (1976 to 1977); Lee L. Mubonenwa (1978-1985); Wellington M. Tshetu (1986-1988); Leonard N. Kumanina (1989 to 1990); Lee L. Mubonenwa (1991-1993).

North-East Namibia Field: Lee L. Mubonenwa (1993-1999).

Namibia Field: Lee L. Mubonenwa (2000-2006); Meshack M. Mukubonda (2006-2012).

Namibia Conference: Meshack M. Mukubonda (2012-2016).

North Namibia Conference: Pumulo Muyunda (2016-2019).

Namibia North Conference: Pumulo Muyunda (2019-Present).

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## NOTES

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2. William H. Branson, "Daybreak in the Dark Continent," *ARH*, June 12, 1922, 14.
3. *Ibid.*, 14.
4. Mubonenwa, *SDA Church in Namibia*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 9.
6. Gilbert Willmore, *The Caprivi Story*, unpublished manuscript, archived at the Ellen G. White and SDA Research and Heritage Center, Helderberg College of Higher Education, HR-20, 1.
7. Branson, "Daybreak," 15.
8. Willmore, *Caprivi Story*, 2.
9. *Ibid.*, 2.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.



11. Ibid., 5.
12. Ibid., 5
13. L. L. Moffitt, "Camp Meeting at Katima Mulilo," *The Southern African Division Outlook*, August 1, 1931, 12.
14. Ibid, 12
15. Mubonenwa, *SDA Church in Namibia*, 157.
16. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946), 20.
17. Mubonenwa, *SDA Church in Namibia*, 158.
18. Southern Africa Division Executive Committee minutes, February 14, 1951, 8:51.
19. Zambezi Union Mission Executive Committee minutes, December 2, 1952, 358:52.
20. Caprivi Strip Field Mission Executive Committee minutes, action number 131/33/78.
21. Mubonenwa, *SDA Church in Namibia*, 152.

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