

# East Burundi Field

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## NDABADUGITSE SAMSON

Ndabadugitse Samson (B.A. in Theology, Bugema University, Kampala, Uganda) currently serves as a director of Sabbath School, Education and Youth Departments of East Burundi Field. Previously he served in the same field for five years as president. Prior to that, he had served as a frontline pastor.

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East Burundi Field is one of the entities of the Burundi Union Mission. It is located in the central-eastern part of the country, and covers six provinces, namely: Cankuzo, Gitega, Makamba, Mwaro, Rutana, and Ruyigi. East Burundi Field is geographically the largest entity, with a population of 3,343,839, among the fields of the Burundi Union Mission. It is also the least evangelized. Despite this, as of June 30, 2020 East Burundi Field had a membership of 26,450, worshipping in 110 churches.<sup>1</sup>

## Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was established in Burundi in 1925. It was organized as an association in 1931. However, East Burundi Field was not organized until 2002.<sup>2</sup> From the establishment of the church in Burundi, missionaries worked hard to spread the gospel throughout the country. The first church was established in Magarama, in Gitega province, but was not organized until May 23, 1970. The dedication ceremony was attended by the president of the Central African Union, the Lay Activities and MV secretary, and the president of East Burundi Field, Pastor Nsengiyumva Phineas. The church was built of baked bricks and the roof covered with tiles. A house was also built with the same material, as well as a small office. The house was inhabited by pastors but also served as an office. There was also a primary school headed by Pastor Yongo Japhet, East Burundi Field Education director.

Adventism was looked upon as a new religion made of “people who cultivated on Sunday.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, it was not easy to promote such a new religion. Evangelists in Burundi have taken different strategies to reach people with the gospel. They developed a clothing donation system for the most vulnerable and those in need. This system motivated people to join the Adventist Church. Evangelists raised finances through an ingathering system called “UMUSARURO,” going house to house collecting goods and money to support the activities of the church, especially evangelism.<sup>4</sup>

Evangelism proved difficult. Evangelists made long journeys on foot distributing brochures offering Bible correspondence courses. Their efforts bore fruits and membership increased to hundreds at the church of Magarama-Gitega. Canvassers sold books throughout the East Burundi Field and elsewhere in the country.<sup>5</sup>

On Saturday, April 29, 1972, civil war broke out throughout the country. During this political crisis, all officers of the East Burundi Field, as well as all pastors, returned to their homes. All foreign pastors returned to their countries of origin. Most of the pastors were Rwandan, as Rwanda and Burundi are both in the Central African Union. Many pastors fled to Rwanda, Congo, and Tanzania, while others suffered death. The government seized the infrastructure of the East Burundi Field. Some church members remained loyal to their faith, while others paid for their faithfulness with death. The whole country fell into the abyss.<sup>6</sup>

After the 1972 crisis, East Burundi Field relaunched its evangelism. The church's higher organization sent missionaries to Burundi. Pastors who had fled the country returned from exile. But conditions were still not favorable. The local government launched a system of community work organized on Sabbath days. This posed a threat to church members in general and to pastors in particular. Despite these challenges, the church tried to survive, and continued its mission as best as it could. Members planted new churches, including the churches of Cankuzo and Camazi in the Cankuzo province; the churches of Mugina, Burima and Mugerama in Makamba province; and the church of Mago in Ruyigi province.<sup>7</sup>

## The Period from 1984 to 1987

In 1984 the government decided to close certain churches, including Seventh-day Adventist churches. In East Burundi Field the crisis affected all pastors and church members. Pastors were chased, they returned home. Foreign pastors were forced out of the country. Church buildings closed. The government seized church infrastructure, including houses, health facilities, and school buildings. Forces seized the East Burundi Field headquarters. The Inspector of Education occupied one of the mission houses by force. The government seized the church's primary school in Magarama.<sup>8</sup>

Some pastors and church members were imprisoned. Still others suffered torture. Some church members left their congregations, while others joined other religious denominations.<sup>9</sup>

During this period of persecution, Adventists organized themselves in house meetings or in secret places to worship on Sabbath. They were wanted by the police and subjected to threats from the local administration, but most persevered in the faith. The most surprising thing during that crisis period was that church membership increased. Pastors organized night-time baptisms. Personal evangelism continued from day to day. The fervent witness of those who persisted in faith despite trials inspired many to follow in the footsteps of the persecuted. Many prisoners received Jesus as their Savior. A mother who was beaten to near death during that persecution testified that when they assisted pastors who were tortured and imprisoned without cause, they saw in those tribulations a sign of the validity of the Adventist message.<sup>10</sup>

In 1987 the government of Piere Buyoya declared at Cibitoke stadium, in the province of Cibitoke, that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was once again given freedom to worship God in Burundi.<sup>11</sup> The church was

authorized to continue its evangelistic activities. There was joy throughout the country, not only by Adventist church members but also by the public in general. Persecution had just ended, and church buildings reopened.

## The Period after 1984-1987

The crisis caused a leadership vacuum in East Burundi Field, from headquarters to local churches. After the church resumed its activities, membership gradually increased, as did tithes and offerings. This prompted the Africa Indian Ocean Division to reorganize the church in the Eastern part of the country. On September 16, 2002, the former East Burundi Field was reorganized Pastor Charles Montille and Carlyle Bayne, special delegates sent by the Africa Indian Ocean Division.<sup>12</sup> The East Burundi Mission was reorganized with 27 organized churches, five ordained pastors and 8,172 church members divided into nine districts: Gitega, Nyanza-lac, Makamba, Buyaga, Rutoke, Mago, Camazi, Cankuzo, and Ruyigi.<sup>13</sup> Upon its reorganization, the leadership was composed of President Hategekimana Samuel and Secretary-Treasurer Nziguheba Jerome.

Adventist evangelism in the territory covered by East Burundi Field has historically faced many challenges. Christianity in the region dates back to the first Catholic missionaries in the late 1800s. In 1896, Catholic missionaries moved to the regions of Buyogoma in Muyaga in the current province of Cankuzo where, at the national level, the first Catholic church was established.<sup>14</sup> Protestant missionaries arrived in the early 20th century. The Seventh-day Adventist Church came and settled in the territories of Bubanza and Ngozi.

The Catholic Church is the most dominant religion in Burundi in general and in the area covered by East Burundi Field in particular. With the presence of European missionaries in Burundi, the clash between Catholics and Protestants was foreseeable. To avoid such a situation, the German resident Schimmer divided Burundi into two zones following a north-south line passing through the center of the country. He reserved the eastern zone for Catholics and the western zone for Protestants.<sup>15</sup> Thus the East Burundi Field serves in a primarily Roman Catholic area.

East Burundi Field operates one dispensary located at Nyanza-Lac, in Makamba Province. The Government seized another dispensary located at Rutsindu, in Cankuzo Province. East Burundi Field's educational system comprises nine schools run under an agreement signed between the government and the Church. Those nine schools include three fundamental and six post-fundamental schools. Out of six provinces that make up the field, Mwaro Province is the only one where there is no school.

## Conclusion

From its very beginning, East Burundi Field evolved along a line of trials, political unrest, and instability. Despite those challenges, the Adventist message is rooted in the region. Churches have been planted and others organized in different corners. However, the journey is still long in the areas of health, education, and

stewardship. If these various domains are strengthened, East Burundi Field will keep growing, and the gospel commission will move forward.

## List of Presidents

Hategekimana Samuel (2002-2003); Nsabiyaemye Jethron (2003-2005); Baranzika Patrice (2006-2010); Ndabadugitse Samson (2011-2015); Bidandaza Benjamin (2016-2018); Niyubahwe Eric (2021-).

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### SOURCES

Gahama, Joseph. *Le Burundi sous l'Administariton Belge. La Période du Mandat 1919-1939*. Paris, France: Karthala, 2001.

Mworoha, Emile. *Histoire du Burundi Des origines a la fin du XIXe Siècle*. Paris, France: Hatier, 1987.

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

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "East Burundi Field," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2021), <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=22105>.
- Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2019).
- Interview with Gaspar Habimana, the first Magarama church member and an usher at the East Burundi Field Office, in November 2020.
- Ibid.
- Interview with Marie Bigirimana, an eyewitness who survived the persecution of 1984-1987, in November 2020.
- Interview with Barute David, retired pastor from North West Burundi Mission, Buganda, October 10, 2010.

12. West Burundi Mission Archives, October 7, 2020.

13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2005), 58.

14. Emile Mworoha, *Histoire du Burundi Des origines a la fin du XIXe Siècle* (Paris, France: Hatier, 1987), 246.

15. Joseph Gahama, *Le Burundi sous l'Administariton Belge. La Période du Mandat 1919-1939* (Paris, France: Karthala, 2001), 236.

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