

Adventist Church in Western Kenya

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The Adventist faith first came to Western Kenya through the work of a South African settler farmer named David Sparrow and his wife Sallie who settled among the Nandi people in 1911.¹ They began to share their faith with the Nandi people and one of his domestic workers named Caleb Kipkessio Busienei was converted in 1916. They began holding regular church services on their farm on the Sabbath almost as soon as they arrived. In 1928, Ezekiel Kimenjo araap Maswai became an Adventist after the mission he worked for sent him to south Nyanza, the cradle of Adventism, to counter the influence of the Adventists on his denomination. He became an Adventist and returned to Nandi where he connected with David Sparrow and Caleb Busienei. Both converts trained to become literature evangelists and in 1931 established the first church in western Kenya at Kaigat.²

The Adventist Message Goes to the Luhya People

The Luhya are a diverse group of Bantu-speaking people who occupy much of western Kenya. In 1933, Caleb Busienei, now a literature evangelist, left Kaigat and went to canvass in Shiandiche near the border between the Nandi and the Luhya.³ There he sold the book *Vita Kuu (The Great Controversy)* by E. G. White) to a Luhya man named Petero Chetambe. Chetambe was immediately taken by the message and could not have enough of it. Caleb promised to return. On the agreed date, he brought with him Ezekiel Kimenjo who shared the gospel with Chetambe. Chetambe had invited his brother and about 20 men from the village to listen to the Adventist message. This was the first time Adventism reached Luhya country and they began to hold regular Sabbath services. Pastor Spencer G. Maxwell, then superintendent of the East Africa Union, came to see the group at Shiandike. After further teaching, he baptized Chetambe in 1935.⁴ Following his baptism Chetambe became the first evangelist to the Luhya⁵ people.

The North-West Kenya Mission

Soon after Kaigat was established in 1931, Pastor Spencer Maxwell organized the North-West Kenya Mission which was based in Nakuru. He designated Kimenjo and Kipkessio as his evangelists in the area. In 1928, Maxwell had replaced W. T. Bartlett as the superintendent of the East Africa Union Mission (EAUM) which covered Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika.⁶ By 1929 the EAUM was renamed the East Africa Union Conference and Maxwell, who headed the new organization, moved its headquarters from Gendia to Nakuru.⁷ At the end of

1934 the winter council of the Northern European Division held in Poznan, Poland, voted to transfer the headquarters of the East Africa Union from Nakuru to Nairobi.⁸ Two houses that had been put up in Nakuru to house Maxwell and other staff were put on the market so as to fund the transfer. One of the houses was sold for £800, which immediately went to the relocation. The other house remained unsold. On February 7, 1935, Maxwell asked for some money to construct a small *banda*⁹ at Kaigat which could be used to house a visiting missionary. The funds were granted and Maxwell constructed a small structure next to the Kaigat church which was comfortable enough for a visiting missionary.¹⁰

By 1936, there was evidence of evangelical vibrancy and promise in the Kaigat area. Maxwell sent over H. A. Matthews to assist the work as well as Mariko Otieno. Ezekiel Kimenjo and Otieno continued their work in the Kaigat area and the Kabras region where Chetambe was already working passionately. In July 1937 Otieno was discharged from duty, leaving Kimenjo as the sole African worker in the Nandi region while Chetambe continued to work among the Luhya. H. A. Matthews continued to oversee the work in the area.¹¹

At an EAU session held in Nairobi on February 8, 1937, Pastor Matthew C. Murdoch from Scotland was appointed to be in charge of the North-West Kenya Mission.¹² During that session, it was also voted that the North-West Kenya Mission be moved from Nakuru to Chebwai.¹³ The second house at Nakuru was sold for £750 and the money was voted to be used to establish the mission at Chebwai. The decision to base the mission at Chebwai and not Kaigat was driven by the higher population in the Chebwai area and the larger Luhya country. In addition, a report by F. H. Thomas, W. T. Bartlett, and Spencer Maxwell analyzed the structural barriers to mission work in Nandi and cited stiff resistance by locals, other established denominations, and the provincial administration. This made Kaigat, the oldest church in Western Kenya, much less attractive as a mission center. The Luhya, on the other hand, were literally demanding that the Adventists establish a mission center. It was difficult to ignore the Macedonian call made by Chief Mulupi himself, who even offered land and went ahead to petition the local native council to give the Adventists more land. Matthews then moved to South-West Kenya (Nyanchwa) to replace A. F. Bull, while Matthew C. Murdoch left South-West Kenya and went to Chebwai to take charge.

In the mind of the local chief, Chebwai was to establish a school to meet the educational needs of the people there. Pastor Murdoch laid down the basic infrastructure for the school. He also built the mission offices and, using part of the money that had been voted from the sale of the Nakuru house, they embarked on building a modern mission house. The design for the house was provided by the press manager at Kendu.¹⁴ Murdoch's work was now cut out. The EAU formed a local committee to oversee the mission work. The committee included Murdoch himself, S. G. Maxwell, and the headmaster of the new school at Chebwai, F. Achieng. Achieng became the first African member of a local mission committee. Murdoch was granted a car loan of £130, repayable at £20 per quarter. Murdoch used Achieng to also look at the education work in Nandi, while at the same time he used Chetambe, who had undergone ministerial training, to minister at Kaigat.

The second church after Kaigat was Luandeti. The school at Luandeti was established in 1936 even before the arrival of Murdoch. Next was the church at Shiandike and the school there followed shortly. Murdoch also oversaw the establishment of the church and school at Nzoia.¹⁵ He then sent applications for registration of the three schools, including the one at Chebwai. He started by constructing the education office, currently administration office, and partitioned it to provide for an office, a safe, a bedroom, and a garage. He then constructed two dormitories: Chetambe dorm for men, named after the first Luhya pastor, Petero Chetambe, and Lukania dorm for women. He also constructed two classrooms, a grass thatched church, a school kitchen, and a library. All these buildings are still in existence.

In 1938 Murdoch obtained the mission house design from the church which had built the exact same house at Kendu for the press manager. Murdoch took the design to the district health officer for approval, whereupon construction commenced. In 1940 the house was completed and Murdoch moved in, becoming the first occupant. The iconic house has three bedrooms, a spacious living room with a fireplace, an office, a kitchen, a store, and an underground water tank to store harvested rain water.

Education Work at Chebwai

The school at Chebwai opened its doors in January 1937. The first teacher was F. Achieng who was also the head teacher. A year later, Murdoch brought in Mordecai Awuor who became the elementary teacher for Chebwai starting in 1939.¹⁶ Awuor had only recently qualified with an elementary teacher's certificate from Kamagambo Training School.¹⁷ He was given Sh. 24 per month and moved to Chebwai with his family. The other teacher was Benjamin Juma who had attained the Standard IV qualification from Lugulu. Because of his lower qualifications, Murdoch paid him Sh. 12 per month. Juma was one of the first people to join the Adventist church. Prior to coming to Chebwai, he was a teacher at the Malava Friends Africa Mission School and, soon after he became an Adventist, he joined the staff at Chebwai. Murdoch also designated two Standard III student teachers to help.¹⁸

After five years of operation, there were 94 boys and 11 girls enrolled in the school. Murdoch must be commended for his early recognition of the challenges that prevented girls from going to school, and so he established the dormitory which housed nine girls. This dormitory was eventually named Lukania, after the mother of Elder Jackton Mwachi who was among the pioneer students. A kitchen was also constructed to provide food for the students.

The school fees raised in 1941 amounted to a total of Sh. 401.10. Murdoch designated that the day students would pay 40 cents for Sub A, 75 cents for Sub B, and those in Standard I paid Sh. 1.50, Standard II paid Sh. 3, and Standard III paid Sh. 6. Those who boarded at the school were to pay Sh. 19 per year. Murdoch spent some Sh. 1,500 on constructing permanent buildings in 1941. This added two new classrooms with plenty of light. He had completed the dormitory for girls earlier and now he set out to construct another for ten boys. The beds were rather rudimentary, with wood planks placed on raised bricks to form beds. There was one latrine with two

partitions for the genders and sufficient water provided for bathing. To help in the education work, a school garden was started to teach agriculture and provide extra-curricular instruction. The school plot was surrounded by a fence. At the middle of the mission grounds the school playground was set up. In 1941, Murdoch spent Sh. 100 on blackboards, two tables, and two chairs for the teachers. The money also paid for 15 desks which seated three pupils each.

Unlike other schools, the school at Chebwai was well provisioned. There were exercise books for all the pupils in the primary section, Standards I to III. Other schools were writing on the floor or using slates. The instruction was in both Kiswahili and English, unlike other schools that emphasized the vernacular. With the high standards, the pupils who had studied at Chebwai were much sought after. Some 12 boys were sent to Kamagambo in 1942, with two of them taking the teacher training program. In 1942 the boarding section included 23 boys and ten girls, for a total of 33. Chebwai School holds the distinction of being one of the oldest boarding schools in Western Kenya. The produce from the school gardens was sufficient to feed the boarders, and the agricultural officer for North Kavirondo (presently Kakamega county) visited the school on May 14, 1941, and expressed his satisfaction at the significant groundnut and maize crop at the school.¹⁹ The inspector of schools, T. G. Benson, during his July 1942 visit, stated, "Altogether satisfactory progress. Pupils clean and lively, work very fair, buildings excellent. Promises to be a really good school."²⁰ More schools followed including Kapsokwony, where Murdoch had received a call from Samuel Naibei Kimkung to establish a school there in 1937.²¹ Through the years, the Chebwai School continued to shine until 1966 when a secondary school was established.

Chebwai Secondary School

The secondary school was started by Pastor Fredrick K. Wangai in 1966.²² This school made history as the first Adventist secondary school in the Central Kenya Field.²³ Those who assisted him both morally, financially, and materially were: Japheth Sudi, Pastor Wellington Alube, Ezekiel Inzai, Josiah Asiyo, Joel Mmasi, Joram Indeche, Japheth Kahawa, Jackson Tawai, Joseph Musinde, Meshack Musiya from Kimang'eti, Sospeter Shamala, and John Kabula, a carpenter. Pastor Jairus Mukhwana provided the plan for the school building and helped with the construction. Others included Pastor Benjamin Ngoni and Pastor Nathan Oyiengo. These also served on the planning committee under the chairmanship of Pastor Zephaniah Oyierwho, who was at that time the Central Kenya Field education director.

Spread of the Adventist Message

Three people who were crucial in the establishment of the Adventist message in western Kenya were Caleb Busienei, Ezekiel Kimenjo Maswai, and Petero Chetambe. In the chronological order of the churches established in Western Kenya, Kaigatin Nandi was the first to be organized in 1931, followed by Lwandeti in what is now Kakamega County organized in 1933. This was followed by Chebwai in 1936, Kapsokwony and Chemoge both in

Mt. Elgon in 1937 and 1938, respectively, followed by Kakimanyi and Nzoia in 1939. Murdoch left Kenya in 1943 and went to South Africa where he continued as a missionary at the Natal-Transvaal Conference. In his place D. M. Swaine took over. Swaine had been a pastor in the South England Conference and had heeded the call to come to Kenya to work at Chebwai.

In September 1945, Swaine formally made a request to Chief Mulupi Shitanda and asked that the plot of land at Chebwai, now measuring 17 acres, be expanded by a grant of more land. The main landholder in the area, Mzee Kuvuyo, agreed to give more land,²⁴ as did other landholders, for a total of another 15 acres granted to Chebwai, and for a final total of 32 acres for the school. This allowed the Chebwai School to be registered as a sector school, and it could now take students up to Standard IV. Most of the pioneer students came in as non-Adventists, but they soon became Adventists. The mission station was now bigger and able to more effectively spread the message. In 1948, Pastor K. J. Berry took over from Pastor Swaine. He would expand Chebwai land to a total of 40 acres, making it one of the largest mission plots in Kenya.²⁵

In 1943, the Adventist message reached Bukwala. An Adventist woman from Maliera, one of the pioneer Adventist mission stations in Luo Nyanza, took the message to Bukwala and established a vibrant congregation there. Other early churches include Namagara, Kimang'eti, Bisunu, Kalenda, Mutonyi, and Shipala, which began between 1939 and 1961. The message spread further north to Kitale in 1962 (although the departing Europeans had already established a church there in the late 1940s).²⁶ After evangelistic campaigns conducted by Pastor Wellington Alube, the church was reestablished in Kitale. Later in the 1980s, the Chebwai Church gave birth to the Kakamega Church, after more than 200 youth from Chebwai Station, that comprised the Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, and Bukwala districts, conducted a two-week evangelistic campaign, followed by another campaign by Pastor Stafford from the United States.

From Bukwala, the Adventist message spread to Shiongo, Mungweso, Khwisero, Buruli, and Mumias; then to Ilungu, Ebutongoi, Mungoma, and Majengo (now Vihiga county), as branch Sabbath Schools between 1970 and 1980. All of these places now have organized Seventh-day Adventist churches.²⁷

From Mt. Elgon, Adventism spread to Kitale town. This work can be attributed to Pastor Benjamin Sikwata and Jacob Ng'ang'a Karau who, having taken Adventism to other areas, moved to Kitale town which was the heart of the White Highland, and European farmers owned huge tracts of land which produced mainly grains, wheat and maize.²⁸ The church in Kitale began at the Kitale GK (government of Kenya) Prisons, in the social hall that was used by prisoners. The church attracted membership from all groups including civil servants, business men, and other urban residents who had already become Adventists elsewhere.²⁹ From Kitale the Adventist message spread to West Pokot county, where it met Robert Kamakili who became a pillar of a vibrant Adventist church. He was joined by Joseph Parklea, a businessman from Chepareria.³⁰

North-West Kenya Conference

The North-West Kenya Conference has its roots in the North-West Kenya Mission Field that was founded on January 25, 1933, after the establishment of the Kaigat Church.³¹ Pastor Spencer Maxwell, who was the president of the EAU, also was superintendent of the North-West Kenya Mission. The head office was at Nakuru, but in 1937 it relocated to Chebwai. The second superintendent of the NWKM was Pastor Matthew Murdoch who took over from Maxwell in 1937. The territory covered western and northern Kenya to the borders of Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Murdoch handed over the work to D. M. Swaine in 1943 and he, in turn, handed it over to K. J. Berry in 1948. In 1953 the North-West Kenya Mission Field was dissolved and incorporated into the Central Kenya Field.³² Its former territory remained under the Central Kenya Field until 1981 when the Western Kenya Field was founded.³³ In 2010 the Western Kenya Field changed its status to a conference. In 2015 the WKC was split to create the North-West Kenya Conference and the Greater Rift Valley Conference.

The dream to organize a separate field from the Western Kenya Field started at the yearend meetings of the Western Kenya Field in 1990 under the leadership of Pastor Joseph Rono. Pastor Patrick Kania, Pastor Nathan Oyiengo, and Mathias Mumbwani were sent to administer the proposed field. The choice of Webuye town as the headquarters of the proposed field was decided at Chebwai. The meeting was chaired by Pastor N. Kyale, then president of East African Union. Pastor Benjamin Ngoni mobilized a group of elders under the leadership of Elders Francis Njoroge, Willis Wanchilonga, and Elder Chonge. They started the journey by mobilizing members to raise funds for purchasing a piece of land on which to build field offices. They met Elder Tali who sold to them the current land and the building which was renovated for an office in 1993.

In 2001 the East Africa Union advised centralization and the proposed field was called back to the mother field to allow membership growth, spiritual growth, and self-reliance growth in the entire Western Kenya Field, which was given conference status in 2010. During the yearend meetings of 2013, the Western Kenya Conference Executive Committee proposed to subdivide the conference for easier governance based on the fact that the conference had exhibited stable spiritual maturity, growth in membership, and self-reliance (finance). Pastors Mbayi, Boiyo, and Nyakego were sent to carry out the promotion and sensitize the membership so it would be ready for the subdivision. On August 3, 2015, the motion to subdivide the Western Kenya Conference was voted by a special constituency meeting at the University of Eastern Africa Baraton. The motion carried. The elected leaders to pioneer this new conference were Pastor Samuel Mbayi (president), Pastor James Boiyo (executive secretary), and Pastor Boaz Ouma Onyango (treasurer). Others included Pastor R. Wafula (ministerial secretary), P. Muchenje (stewardship director), S. Mbugua (evangelism), E. Nyaribo (youth ministry) and E. Nyabanga (women's ministries). Later two more departmental secretaries were added, Pastor E. Makhanu (education director) and J. Namunyu (publishing). The conference started with a membership of 37,062, with 404 organized churches, and with a tithe income of US\$40,000³⁴ per month. In 2018 the conference had more than 50,000 members with more than 500 organized churches, and a tithe income averaging US\$100,000 per month.³⁵

Chebwai Secondary School Records, Chebwai, Kenya.

Minutes of the East Africa Union Committee meeting (session 206) held in Nairobi, February 8-16, 1937. East-Central Africa Division archives, Nairobi, Kenya.

Northern European Division. *The Advent Survey*, February 1935.

Records at the North-West Kenya Conference, Webuye, Kenya.

Sang, Godfrey K., Kili, and K. Hosea. *On the Wings of a Sparrow*. Gapman Publications Ltd., Nairobi, 2017.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953-1994.

NOTES

1. The author acknowledges contributions to this article by Pastors A. J. Kutondo, P. Kesis, and W. O. Alube.
2. Godfrey K. Sang, Kili, and K. Hosea, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. *SDA Yearbook*, 1929, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 141.
7. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
8. *The Advent Survey*, February 1935, Northern European Division, 3.
9. Small house.
10. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
11. Ibid.
12. Minutes of the East Africa Union Committee meeting (session 206) held in Nairobi, February 8-16, 1937.
13. Ibid.
14. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.

15. Records at the Chebwai Mission.
16. This was the father of Mordoch O. Awuor who had served as the dean of students at Baraton. Mordoch Awuor was in fact born in Chebwai. Mordecai named him Murdoch but changed the name to Mordoch.
17. Ibid.
18. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
19. School records at Chebwai.
20. Ibid.
21. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
22. Interview with Pastor Fred K. Wangai at Nairobi, July 9, 2019.
23. Ibid.
24. Interview with Pastor Aggrey Kutondo at Chebwai via telephone on July 3, 2019.
25. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
26. The main European Adventists in the Kitale area included the families of Thuys de Lange and Hendrik Kruger. They left Kenya before they could hand over the church to an African congregation and the Baptist Church took over possession of the Adventist plot in Kitale. (See Sang and Kili, *op. cit.*). The Adventists had to start afresh with a new plot.
27. Wellington Alube, Oral interview on May 11, 2018.
28. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*, 237.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Minutes of the East Africa Union Committee held at Kamagambo January 25, 1933 (Session no. 139).
32. *SDA Yearbook*, 1953.
33. *SDA Yearbook*, 1982.

34. <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/kenya/exchange-rate-against-usd> (Exchange rate for 2015)

35. Records at the North-West Kenya Conference.

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