Monnier, Henri  
(1896–1944)

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Henri Monnier was the pioneer missionary to Rwanda whom the locals called “Rukandirango” (The Mighty Man).

Early Years
Henri Monnier was born in Berne, Switzerland to parents who had been Adventists for ten years and his father was a church elder. He was baptized at age 15. The family moved to Chaux-de-Fonds and he attended the Adventist school at Tramelan. He moved to London in 1915 to avoid being drafted into the army. There, he established a business selling and repairing watches.

Marriage
In 1919 Henri married Winifred Maddams, who had served in The Salvation Army. Shortly thereafter they met D. E. Delhove, a Belgian who had been sent as a missionary to Kenya by the British Union in 1913. When the First World War broke out, Delhove had been drafted into the Belgian army. He travelled through Rwanda several times during his four years of conscription in the Belgian Congo, and he was positively impressed by the people and the country. Upon returning to his family in Belgium after an absence of five years, he took them to Stanborough School near London to reconnect with the church. Monnier then met the Delhoves in London and shared his passion for mission in Africa with them.

Mission to Africa
Rwanda had been claimed as a part of German East Africa in 1890, but in 1916 the League of Nations transferred administrative authority to Belgium. This opened the gate for Belgian Adventist missions, and Delhove was called to serve there. Inspired by this commission, he contacted the Monniers and persuaded them to serve with him. The two families departed for Rwanda in March 1919. Upon arrival, they temporarily occupied buildings at Rubengera, a former Lutheran mission where Winifred gave birth to a daughter, Olive, on August 4. A month later Delhove's third daughter was also born there. Delhove and Monnier visited the Belgian Administrator at Kigali and were granted permission to occupy the Lutheran Bethel Mission stations. The Monniers remained at Rubengera and the Delhoves moved to nearby Kirinda. Then tragedy struck. Monnier's wife passed away and was buried at Kirinda. Mrs Delhove took care of baby Olive. Monnier was greatly saddened but decided to continue his mission. He moved to Remera alone while the Delhoves remained at Kirinda. Expecting to remain at these stations, they restored the buildings and gardens and established positive relationships with the local communities.

After two years of hard work a great blow struck. These stations were assigned to the Société Belge de Missions Protestants au Congo and they had to leave, but they were granted permission to search for new sites. These two greatly disturbing events did not quench Monnier's missionary commitment.

The Delhoves moved to nearby Gitwe, which in due course became the center of Adventist mission in Rwanda. Monnier was joined by Alfred A. Matter, a Swiss missionary from Kenya, and they set about establishing a mission at Kabangiri near Lake Mohasi in eastern Rwanda. After a year of hard work he suffered a third great disappointment. The area was delegated to the British for the Cape to Cairo railway and they had to leave. After a prolonged search they found a site at Rwankeri in the northwest of the country at an elevation of 7,600 feet. They moved there with several Rwandese co-workers in April 1921.

**Mission Success**

Monnier set up residence in a small pole and thatch hut and they commenced erecting mission buildings. The Matters left on furlough soon after the transfer and Monnier remained there alone for almost three years. During those years of solitude, he lived close to the local community and learned to speak Kinyarwanda as if it was his mother tongue. He also commenced erecting needed mission buildings. He taught the Rwandese how to make and lay bricks, saw wood, make doors and windows, and erect buildings. He started school classes, and Sabbath services were attended by many. The first baptism—that of two candidates was conducted in 1924. Delhove, riding a mule, made occasional 90-mile journeys from Gitwe to provide support. On one of those trips, he found Monnier almost worn out. He then advised him to leave on furlough, take a course on tropical medicine, find a wife, and not fail to return.

Monnier went to Switzerland and fulfilled Delhove's recommendations. He married Olga Pavlov, a nurse and Bible worker who was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, and had moved to Switzerland. He also took a course in
tropical medicine and earned a diploma which qualified him to receive free medicine for the mission community from the Belgian Administration. He returned to Rwankeri with his new wife toward the end of the year. The Matters had returned with his sister Marie (a pharmacist who opened a small clinic) and made other improvements at the mission.

The team settled down as usual to serious business. They erected more buildings and taught the indigenous people to become teachers. The subjects included reading, writing, and arithmetic. Five teachers were taught in the school at Rwankeri in 1925. In addition, they started four out-schools and commenced evangelistic work. In a letter to his brother Vital, Monnier described how busy he was during the day and that he spent much of the night translating the book of Acts.

The Gitwe Years, 1925-1928

Delhove was commissioned to establish a new mission in Burundi and the Monniers were transferred to Gitwe to direct the work there until they returned. Several important developments took place during these years. First, H. E. Guillebaud, a Cambridge educated linguist, arrived at Kabale with a commission from the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) to translate the Bible into Kinyarwanda. He invited Monnier to join the translation group because of his mastery of the language.

Secondly, Monnier was requested to teach the young Tutsi at the court of Musinga, the chief (Mwami) at Nyanza. Previously the CMS missionaries had established close contact with the Hutu, but failed to do so with the Tutsi. Monnier was requested to teach the essentials of Christianity to the young members of the court. Once or twice a week he rode the 20 odd miles to Nyanza on his small motorcycle and conducted classes. At the outset only the group at the court attended, but in due course the surrounding chiefs joined them. The Mwami often attended and at times more than 200 were present. Geoffery Homes of the CMS reported: “We need a worker at Nyanza. Thus far only an Adventist European visits once or twice a week.” Later the CMS missionaries were also invited to the court to learn Kinyarwanda. Monnier established a positive relationship with many of the locals, and also with the Mwami, and his son Rudahigwa, who replaced his father in 1931. Monnier gained considerable benefits from his relationship with the Mwami court. While living alone at Rwankeri he had learned to speak the local dialect, but now this was enriched with the court Kinyarwanda. In addition, discussion with the court group deepened his understanding of the Banyarwanda culture and religion. The articles he wrote for church papers reveal his deepening understanding of Banyarwanda culture and religion:

A little church has been organized ... surrendering is not a light matter. It means the sacrifice of old friends, the old association must pass to make room for a new class of people, all striving together for eternal life. No more pagan fears, no more mystical worship ... Jesus is all to them ... With these people everything that happens is supernatural. Therefore, they must do their utmost to gain the favor of the gods that cause ‘bad luck.’ There is a true God, they believe, but they do not care much about Him, for He in His goodness will not do them much
harm. There is a world of bad spirits...whom we may rightly call their god...that can harm them... composed of their people who have passed away...they must make sacrifices to appease the wrath of any bad spirit.

His experience, and what he learned in contact with members of the Mwami court, gave him an understanding of their religious consciousness and concepts of reality. This equipped him to communicate the gospel effectively to the Tutsi and other members of the community and draw them into Christianity.

Thirdly, a conference on the translation of the Scriptures, presided over by Rev. Roome of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), was convened at Kirinda in April 1927. The participants were H. Guillebaud of the CMS, E. Durand, J. Honore, A. Lestrade of the Belgian Protestant Mission, and H. Monnier. Monnier and Mrs. Guillebaud functioned as joint secretaries. Guillebaud described the concerns addressed at the conference:

We began with orthography ... how the native sounds should be written ... Then we discussed transliteration ... words for which there is no Kinyarwanda equivalent ...Then came a list of religious terms—words for God, the Holy Spirit, angels, demons ... there was a wonderful working of God ... A feeling of real mutual regard and friendship sprang up ... Guillebaud.

This was followed by a succession of translation conferences during which Monnier enthusiastically pressed for completion of the translation and printing of the gospels without delay. Despite a little tension between Monnier and some of the members regarding a few theological issues, the printed version of the New Testament arrived in November 1931 and was received with great rejoicing. Guillebaude wrote:

I am delighted to be able to tell you that Monnier ...has just bought 500 more copies and there is good hope that their station may buy yet another 500. We were led to spend a night at his station at Rwankeri on our way from Shiram to Gahini.

In his farewell letter, Guillebaude wrote:

Dear friends of Ruanda: What great cause for thankfulness in the cooperation and friendly attitude of M. Honorez of the Belgian Mission and M. Monnier of the Seventh-day Adventist. Monnier has been, and is, most appreciative of the translation work and most generous in waiving his objections where we disagree in order that there should be no hindrance to the translation.

A. C. Stanley Smith was appointed to continue translating the Old Testament and he maintained a close relationship with Monnier. He spent a weekend at Rwankeri and preached a Sabbath sermon on Hebrews11. The entire Kinyarwanda Bible was published in 1957 and the names of both Adventists who had contributed to the translation process, H. Monnier and A. L. Hands, were printed on the flyleaf. In addition, Mrs Monnier was presented with a commemorative plaque in appreciation of the outstanding contribution of her husband by W. J. Bradnock, Secretary of Translations of the BFBS.
Ordination and Return to Rwankeri

Monnier was ordained at a conference at Gendia Mission in the Belgian Congo on January 24, 1928. In August of that year he attended the Missions Conference at Marienhöhe attended by leaders from the General Conference and missionaries from Africa and other areas. This was an enriching experience during which he gained a wider view of the outreach and methodology of Adventist world mission.

The Adventist church in Rwanda was granted “Personnalité Civile” by a Royal proclamation on July 18, 1928, and the legal representatives listed were D. E. Delhove, A. A. Matter, H. Monnier, and M. Duplouy. This was encouraging and gave them confidence in dealing with the authorities and other mission bodies. Rwanda was transferred to the African Division with C. W. Bozarth as superintendent in 1928. He reported that Rwanda had three missions, six missionary families, 68 local workers, and 31 village schools with an enrolment of 2,417.

Bozarth rejoiced:

At Rwankeri: Every Sabbath about 1,500 attend ... services and the influence of the mission has gone out many miles in every direction ... A spirit of evangelism is getting hold of our European and native workers. The month of July is given over to evangelistic work. We are looking forward to a great harvest.

In 1928-29 there was a drought. Inasmuch as most relied on subsistence farming there was a severe food shortage. The Tutsi had hoarded some food but would not share it. This resulted in antagonism between the two groups. The Mwami from Nyanza crossed the Nyabarongo River to help resolve the conflict while Monnier went to meet him and organize a warm welcome. A few years later Rudahigwa, the new Mwami, who had attended some of Monnier’s classes at Nyanza, also crossed the river and visited Rwankeri. He spent the night there and was a guest at meals with the mission group. Both of these visits boosted the standing of Rwankeri and added impetus to the growing Adventist movement.

From this time on, Monnier employed a three-phase strategy: schools with well-prepared teachers, healthcare, and community evangelism. As a result, the expansion of the church was rapid. Monnier had sheets of hymns he had translated and given to the students and they learned to sing gospel hymns enthusiastically. He also produced a series of sermon notes and a baptismal manual that teachers could follow. Preachers and teachers and groups of enthusiastic lay people were organized into groups annually and went out to assigned areas in July for a month or longer and engaged the communities in inspiring meetings and Bible study. The Kinyarwanda hymnbook of popular gospel songs, many of them translated by Monnier, was published in 1932 and added to the attraction of their meetings.

Monnier so had the mission in his heart that he even used his personal savings for some projects. For example, in 1932 a committee meeting was held in Gitwe. At the meeting a question was raised concerning the education and training of girls. The missionaries were mostly concerned about providing Christian women for marriage to the indigenous male mission workers. They had noticed that the wives of the male mission workers were not
Christians.

Eventually, such wives became a hindrance to the work. They thus reasoned that women who were trained will be married by single men working in the mission for the furtherance of the mission work. Yet, this training needed means. When Monnier saw that the idea was to be dropped because of lack of means, he offered (together with his companion missionary) to use his own means to sponsor a girls’ training school. Thus the first girls’ school was built in Gitwe, Ruanda-Urundi.9

When Bozarth visited Rwankeri again in 1933 he wrote “Never have I seen people so eager to accept and follow the truth ... there will be over 600 additions to Bible classes for the last quarter of the year.”10 Fifteen months later A. F. Tarr, secretary of the division reported that he found a congregation of 7,157 gathered together for Sabbath School and church, the largest at any of the Adventist missions. He wrote about Monnier’s perplexity at being able to guide and care for this growth with a small number of fellow workers.11

In 1935, J. F. Wright, the new division president, visited Rwankeri. They watched thousands coming down the surrounding hills on Sabbath morning. There were 18,000 at the service and a number of chiefs were present. That Sunday morning 145 were baptized.12 Five years later he visited again and 20,000 were at the church service. Monnier organized a July-August evangelistic program that year conducted by 257 companies, composed of workers and 1,458 lay members, which was anticipated to bring about 3,500 to Christ. Wright wrote, “God is doing great things around the Rwankeri Mission.”13

**Monnier’s Final Days**

The church continued to grow rapidly, but when the Second World War broke out in 1939 a tragic change took place. Monnier’s wife returned to Switzerland with their four children, but he felt he could not leave his co-workers; thus, he remained in Rwanda. He joined his family in 1941; however, upon planning to return to Rwanda a few months later, he was denied a visa. The Rwandese governor Ryckmans reported that the administrators would be happy to have him return, but not before the end of the war. They were afraid that the Germans would attempt to retake Rwanda. Monnier was regarded as a pacifist and his influence was so great and widespread that they felt it unwise to admit him. The denomination offered him a pastoral ministry in Switzerland and other missionary positions in Africa, but he declined. His heart was in Rwanda.

He decided to return, arrived at Rwankeri in 1942, and was met with was an enormous celebration of rejoicing. When governor Ryckmans learned of his arrival he ordered J. R. Campbell, president of the mission to transfer Monnier to Gitwe. In addition, he was not permitted to preach. These were difficult and very sad days for Monnier. He translated *Steps to Christ* and several Old Testament books. To relieve the situation, Elder Neal Wilson, president of the Middle East Union, invited him to serve as superintendent of the Turkish mission. He accepted and arrived in Beirut in 1944. Tragically, he died of Typhoid fever on December 1 at the age of 48. This was a tragic loss of one of the Church’s greatest missionaries.
SOURCES


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