



A church group in Constantinople (Istanbul).

Shared by Hyosu Jung. Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Turkey

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Country History

Turkey is a republic in the Middle East, situated on a large peninsula in Western Asia also known as Asia Minor. A vast plateau between the Black and Mediterranean seas, it includes the history of both Anatolia (the Asian and largest part of Turkey) and Eastern Thrace (the European part of Turkey). It has an area of 301,302 square miles (780,372 square kilometers) and its population (2022) is about eighty-six million.¹ In Europe, modern Turkey shares borders with Greece and Bulgaria; in Asia Caucasus with Georgia and Armenia, and in Asia Proper with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey's highest peak lies on the border with Iran. Nearly 17,000 feet (5000 meters), Mt. Ararat is known in the Judeo-Christian religion as the place where Noah's ark came to rest.²

According to the Turkish constitution, the word "Turk" includes all citizens of the Republic of Turkey and does not distinguish between race or religion. In a 1928 constitutional amendment, Islam was removed as the official state religion and the republic has since considered itself a secular country even though more than nine-tenths of the population is Muslim. In addition to the Muslim majority, there also exist small populations of Jews and Christians divided between Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and other denominations. The mother tongue of Turkish claims 65.1 percent of the population, while 18.9 percent speak Kurdish and a small minority use Arabic as their first language.³

Because the portion known as Anatolia is very fertile, it was one of the earliest places on earth to develop agriculture and thus became a cradle of human civilization. As a result of its strategic, transcontinental location, the country was fought over, conquered, and ruled by a host of ancient civilizations. These included the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, numerous European crusaders, and finally the native Anatolian Ottoman Empire.

First settled by the Greeks in 700 BCE, Istanbul was known as Byzantium. When Emperor Constantine rebuilt the city in 330 CE as the capital of the eastern Roman Empire, it was officially named New Rome. Better known as Constantinople, it would remain the capital of Rome for the next 1,000 years. In 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottomans and became the new capital of the Ottoman Empire.⁴

The story of Turkey's most famous empire is incredibly rich. Beginning in 1300, one insignificant Anatolian tribe rose to become one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen. It was a major power on three continents at once (Europe, Asia, and Africa) and was a force to be reckoned with both militarily and culturally. As with all empires, however, it was inevitable to face a decline beginning with the First World War in 1914. The sultan went into exile, and out of the ruins birthed the modern Republic of Turkey with its capital in Ankara. The man responsible for this rebirth was Mustafa Kemal, also known as Ataturk or father of the Turks. His reputation remains monumental.⁵

When the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, Ataturk initiated a program of modernization. He encouraged European dress and abolished the veil, the fez, and polygamy. Education was secularized, women had equal rights, and he ordered the conversion of the Turkish alphabet from Arabic to Latin script. Freedom of conscience

was provided by law, but proselytizing was prohibited to both Muslims and Christians. Designed to resemble Western parliamentary democracy, Turkey later became a charter member of the United Nations and a member of NATO in 1952. Today Turkey's partnership with the West, its geographic location, and its identity as a majority-Muslim nation with a secular and democratic constitution make it a key player in its region and in the world.⁶

Biblical Connections

Because of this area's strategic role in the early history of the church, Frank Clark rightly called Turkey the "Holy Land of Asia Minor" in his book on the *Seven Churches*.⁷ Evidence of Christianity in its early stages can be seen in one of Istanbul's greatest historical marks, the Hagia Sophia. During the Ottoman Empire it turned into a mosque, then later a museum. After decades the decision was made last year (2021) to turn it back into a mosque. Another important center for early Christianity, and a very important archaeological site, was the city of Ephesus where Christianity was most widespread and where Paul of Tarsus and the apostle John preached.⁸

About sixty percent of the places mentioned in the Bible are in Turkey, and almost all Old Testament sites mentioned are in eastern or southeastern Turkey, which was also called Northern Mesopotamia. Also, two-thirds of the 27 books in the New Testament were either written to or from Asia Minor.⁹

According to the Old Testament, Noah, his children, and the animals that were saved repopulated the earth after the ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat in eastern Turkey. Abraham and his family resided for some time in Haran in southeast Turkey on their way to Canaan after a long journey from Ur of the Chaldeans in southern Mesopotamia.

In 586 B.C. Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians and the temple was destroyed. Many Jews were dispersed outside of Israel during the Jewish Diaspora, and Asia Minor/Anatolia became home to numerous Jewish communities. A Hellenistic kingdom called the Seleucids settled 2,000 Jewish families in Phrygia and Lydia in 240 B.C. Paul's family was probably settled in Tarsus.

Within two decades after Jesus, the gospel spread northward to Antioch, a city located in southeastern Turkey. Here the believers were first called Christians. For the rest of the first century, the land of Turkey became the center for the growing Christian movement. The three great apostles—Paul, Peter, and John are linked with the church in Asia Minor.

Development of Seventh-day Adventist Work

Seventh-day Adventist work began in Turkey when a Greek shoemaker, Theodore Anthony, returned from America in February 1889 as a self-supporting missionary. Having immigrated only two years earlier at the age of 49, he accepted the Adventist message during evangelistic meetings near his home. Selling his business and

all his belongings, Anthony's only ambition was to share his newfound faith among friends and family in his native country.¹⁰

Anthony's arrival marked the beginning of permanent SDA work in the Middle East. He began full-time labor among the Christian minorities in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) but was met with intense opposition and persecution from both Orthodox and Protestant groups, especially the Quaker Mission Society. He was eventually handed over to the authorities who charged him with causing religious dissension and confusion. After two weeks of legal battles, his money depleted, he was forced to earn a livelihood as a cobbler. This meant that he could not devote his full time to the gospel. Anthony rented some quarters from an acquaintance, Mr. Baharian, and utilized his spare time in the evenings and weekends giving Bible readings in his room. When Mr. Baharian's son, Zadour, returned home for summer holidays from his university in Aintab, Cilicia, he became Anthony's first convert.¹¹

After the baptism of Baharian, the leaders of the Central European Mission (located in Basel, Switzerland) realized an opportunity to expand its territory into the Ottoman Empire. During his college years Baharian had mastered the Turkish and Armenian languages. Church leaders felt that publication and distribution of literature would play a major role in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist work in Turkey and therefore invited him to spend two years in further study of the message.

Baharian arrived in Basel in September 1890 to begin his training. After a few months he started translating literature into Armenian and Turkey, which was then published at the Polyglott Press in Basel and sent out along with correspondence to former acquaintances in Cilicia and Istanbul.¹² Over a six-month period 10,000 pages were sent to approximately three hundred persons in twelve cities of Asia Minor, generating a response of fifty-nine letters.¹³

The beginning of a national Armenian Seventh-day Adventist movement was set in motion when Baharian returned to Asia Minor in 1892 as a worker. He connected with Anthony in Constantinople where they visited with families who had read the tracts and asked for Bible studies. That same year they held the first evangelistic meetings in Constantinople, which resulted in six converts (one who later became his wife). In 1893 they held meetings in the cities of Ovjuk, Bardizag (Bahçecik), Aleppo, and Alexandretta.¹⁴

Baharian soon earned the title of "Second Paul." His mission field was approximately the same territory covered by the apostle Paul in Asia Minor (Turkey). Diamondola, in Mildred Olsen's book *Diamondola*, described Baharian as someone who, like Paul, burned with passion for Christ and had unmeasured energy and fearless courage. He often journeyed by foot or on horseback, preaching and teaching the gospel and like Paul was often imprisoned, beaten, and scorned.¹⁵

Within two years of beginning his ministry, several companies composed of Greek and Armenian Christian members were established in Cilicia, Constantinople, and the villages in nearby Nicomedia.¹⁶

In 1894 Baharian became the first national in the Middle East to be ordained to the Adventist ministry. H. P. Holser, president of the Central European Mission, officiated at the ordination. The two men then made an extended tour of Asia Minor, organizing several churches in Constantinople (20 members), Ovajuk, and Bardizag (about 30 members each), and a company in Alexandretta.¹⁷

As the church expanded, it began to encounter more difficulties. The Ministry of Religion in Turkey did not recognize the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In addition, the government imposed tight restrictions on all Armenians. Most of the national workers brought to the gospel by Anthony and Baharian were Armenians, thus making it difficult for them to circulate around the country. Those who attempted to evangelize among their own community encountered fierce opposition and oppression from other Christian groups, especially as their membership grew and their activities could not be hidden.^{18, 19}

Nevertheless, Baharian recognized the importance for the mission of the church to develop and trained this national leadership using a more formal approach. He proposed to the European Mission to establish an educational institute in Turkey for the Armenians. While the idea was received favorably by the church leaders, this would be the first attempt in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination of establishing an educational institute by people of a non-western culture.

The Union decided to experiment by first operating a series of training seminars. Several five-week Bible institutes were held between 1895 and 1909 in Constantinople, Aintab, and Bardizag. Mainly young Armenians attended, plus a few Greeks and some Assyrians and Jews.²⁰ After each course the Bible workers were sent to various parts of the country, some to the interior and others along the coast. They preached part time and colporteur part time, but because their movements were restricted, they were unable to sell much literature. Financial hardships forced many to quit. However, by the close of 1908 the membership was 233 with five churches and ten companies, nine workers, four ordained ministers, two native workers, two licentiate nurses, and a Bible worker.²¹

Leaders realized the situation was far from ideal and determined that a more permanent training institute should be operated by the mission headquarters in Western Europe. In this way professional ministers could be trained, who would then work alongside the Bible workers. It wasn't until 1910, however, that the European Mission under the direction of E. E. Frauchiger (president of the Turkish Mission), was finally able to supply the funds to open a training school. The first year began with five teachers and an enrollment of ten students.²² Within two years thirty individuals of mainly Armenian background served as either district pastors, itinerant preachers, or colporteurs. The school closed two years later in 1912.

The First International Adventist Workers

When in 1903 the Turkish government banished Baharian to his home area of Aintab, church leaders felt that the only solution to this problem of lack of freedom of movement was the introduction of international workers.

In general, they had more liberty to move about in the Ottoman Empire.

On this basis the first American, Dr. A. W. George, was sent to Turkey to begin medical work in Constantinople. He set up a clinic with treatment rooms and asked a young lady, Alexandra Keanides, to join him as a nurse. Dr. George worked from 1903 to 1906 before contracting a fatal illness. His death was a severe blow for the fledgling church. The clinic had to be closed and all the furniture sold. The church leaders, however, saw the value of medical work and sent Alexandra to England to study midwifery, with the purpose of returning one day if the clinic should reopen.²³

As if the matters of persecution and oppression from outside the church were not enough, problems began to surface within the church, as well. In the spring of 1907, handwritten Bible lessons (coming from Egypt) began to circulate throughout the congregations, teaching the importance of keeping the Jewish feasts. Two leaders, Tatarian and Ouzounian, traveled around the country propagating their strange doctrines to the small companies of believers while attacking the Adventist Church and Ellen White in particular.

In the summer of 1907, C. M. AcMoody was sent by the church leaders to hold a series of meetings with the believers in order to refute the doctrines of the feast-keeping offshoot. Beginning in Bursa and taking with him a 13-year-old translator named Diamondola Keanides, he traveled to all the churches around Asia Minor to reestablish their faith in the doctrines of the church. For several months the two traveled together, dismissing any doubts caused by the false teachings. By the end of the journey, not one member remained misled. After only a two-year stint, AcMoody had to return to America in 1909 due to his poor health.²⁴

The attempt to place the leadership of the church in the hands of international workers soon proved to be undesirable. Unable to speak fluently the Turkish, Greek, and Armenian languages, they soon realized their limitations, and many resigned. Early workers also frequently suffered from poor health or quit early for other reasons. W. E. Howell went to Greece in 1908 but was recalled to the General Conference in 1909. In 1908 R. S. Greaves came from Canada and established his headquarters in Smyrna but stayed for only a short time. Dr. A. J. Girou came from France in 1912 to establish a dental clinic in Smyrna, but it closed when he left.

A Window of Religious Freedom (1908-1914)

In 1908 a successful coup against the authoritarian rule of the sultan was carried out by a segment of the Ottoman military, known as the Young Turks.²⁵ By July 1909 a sudden change of the constitution granted freedom of speech and movement. The Adventist Church was ecstatic. C. D. AcMoody wrote: "Since the declaration of the Turkish constitution in July, such liberty has prevailed in the Turkish Empire as never before been known. Perfect freedom of speech and press was granted, and that for which we prayed many years...." Prior to the granting of the constitution, Turkey was considered one of the most difficult countries in the world in which to work.²⁶

For the first time in the history of the work in Turkey, Adventists had the freedom to gather without being fearful of breaking the laws. In August 1909 three indigenous workers from Turkey were able to attend the first General Meeting for the Levant Union²⁷ in Beirut, Syria. Following the meeting, AcMoody and Baharian made an extensive tour throughout the central part of the country, visiting with isolated companies of believers, some who had never seen an Adventist minister.²⁸

In 1909 a Swiss missionary, Elder Frauchiger, arrived in Constantinople as director of the Turkish Church. In addition to opening a training institute (as mentioned earlier), he immediately established a book depository that operated until WWI in 1914. Even though the colporteurs were often beaten and imprisoned, they at least had the freedom to travel around the country distributing thousands of Adventist publications. During the Medz Yerghen in 1914 to 1915, all but two of the Adventist colporteurs, Nicolos Trifonides and Dicran Derhousikian, were killed.²⁹

Mostly Armenians continued to join the still young Adventist Church. By 1909 there were over two hundred members in Anatolia. In September of 1910, Frauchiger organized the first General Meeting in Turkey where delegates from fourteen churches and groups met in Istanbul to attend the business meeting. During this time Asia Minor was divided into the Armenian, Greek, and Turkish churches, with Baharian as president of the Armenian branch. Following the three years of freedom that followed, the church in Turkey flourished, growing their members from 234 to 350 and their preachers from two to 12.³⁰

In 1912 it made sense to the leaders of the Levant Union (LU) to transfer its headquarters from Hamburg, Germany to Constantinople. In the first place, it was in the center of this vast union, and furthermore, despite the persecution, the work expanded most rapidly in Turkey than in any other country of the LU. Elder Frauchiger was elected president of LU, and indigenous leadership continued within the local fields.³¹ By 1912 there were 350 Adventists in Anatolia and by 1914, at the beginning of World War I, the number was 450 and 22 churches.³²

It was mentioned earlier that Diamondola Keanides, a young translator, traveled with the international workers on their journeys, often for months at a time. After her high school graduation in 1912 from an American high school at Bursa, she was employed by the Levant Union to translate Adventist publications and to stencil and mimeograph Sabbath School lessons and tracts. Publications were printed in Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Turkish, Assyrian, Greco-Turkish, and Armeno-Turkish; and since Adventists had no presses of their own, printing was outsourced to commercial printing houses. In addition, Diamondola proofread, edited, gave Bible studies, and distributed literature.³³

When World War I began in June 1914, union headquarters in Constantinople had difficulties communicating with division headquarters in Europe, and the countries belonging to the territory of the Levant Union were forced to split up. Each field relied on their own local or foreign leadership to hold down the fort. George Keough, an Englishman, headed the work in Egypt and F. F. Oster in Iran. Walter Ising remained in charge of the work in Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia (Iraq) while Baharian continued in Turkey and Armenia.

Membership in Turkey at the end of 1914 (six months after the start of the war) had dropped to around 350 members.³⁴

Decimation of the Adventist Church in Turkey (1914-1960)

Between 1915 and 1916, the Medz Yerghen³⁵ took place that all but extinguished the Adventists in Turkey. All efforts of the church over the past 30 years effectively ended as tens of thousands of Armenians were either massacred or deported. More than half of the 450 members lost their lives, while others relocated to the Middle East or immigrated to the West. Among those killed was the pioneer and father of the Adventist movement, Zador Baharian, who was murdered and left by the side of the road for refusing to recant Christianity.

Over the ensuing years, nowhere in the world were the consequences of WWI as disastrous to Seventh-day Adventism as they were in Turkey. The church was brought to the edge of collapse as civil strife and wars between Turkey and Greece continued for several more years. Rebuilding proved to be extremely difficult as refugees steadily left in droves. Others, remembering the horrors, were too fearful to return. A handful of national believers and even fewer international Adventists remained to mop up the damage. The end result left Anatolia mostly empty of Armenians and the replacement of Ottoman rule with a Turkish state.³⁶

In 1917 Levant Union president, Frauchiger, moved to Yugoslavia and was replaced by Henry Erzbürger, who came from the Syrian Mission and knew Arabic. Diamondola, the young translator and a survivor, became secretary-treasurer of the Levant Union in 1918, after the return of Paul Bridde to Germany.³⁷

In the early 1920s the church was forced with the task of rebuilding, but without national leadership this proved to be much more difficult than anticipated.³⁸ At a conference held in Zurich in August 1920, church leaders decided to open an orphanage in Constantinople for the children of Adventist parents who were killed by the massacres. The orphanage, directed by Aaron Larson, opened in the summer of 1922. It operated only a little more than a year before further massacres forced it to relocate to Thessaloniki, Greece.³⁹

By 1922 it was clear that the church would be unable to function as it once did before. Limited to Constantinople and basically reduced to a caretaker capacity, leaders from the European Division met with Erzbürger and the remaining nationals to offer support for the training of new workers, the educating of orphans, the financial support of widows, the publishing work, and the bringing in of new international workers.⁴⁰

By 1923 only one national family remained to carry on the work: A. E. Ashod and his now wife, Diamondola Keanides. In the same year the Levant Union was dissolved into separate fields directly attached to the European Division.

After WWI and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey adopted a secular form of government that was to have no role in religion and vice versa. The 1923 Lausanne Treaty included a section on religious freedom in which the Turkish Government officially recognized only three minority religious communities: Greek Orthodox

Christians, Armenian Orthodox Christians, and Jews.⁴¹ Seventh-day Adventists were not listed. In 1927 the church purchased a property in Taksim, including a four-story complex, but they never were allowed to build a church.

Over the next decade Armenian membership slowly regained as a few isolated Adventists returned to their homeland. All attempts to connect with the community, however, proved to be ineffective, and by the beginning of World War II in 1939, all international Adventists withdrew from Turkey.⁴² For the remainder of the war years, the church became directly responsible under the General Conference.

In 1946 Ashod became the acting superintendent and secretary/treasurer. Working with him was one licensed minister, K. Kaluetian, and one Bible worker, Yebraski Gomig.⁴³ Lay members, Brother Kalustian and Miss Ibraxin (Armenian teacher) helped as best they could. In 1948, after 25 years of faithful service to the church in Turkey, Ashod and his wife moved to Cyprus. He was replaced by B. J. Mondics, the first Adventist international worker to enter Turkey since WWII. . Erich Bethmann wrote in the same year: "It is practically impossible for a Christian mission to do any work there, and although the constitution of Turkey grants freedom of religion, the doors of Turkey are firmly shut."⁴⁴

For the few remaining Christians in the country, the government placed endless restrictions on any kind of religious activity. Public evangelism and all religious propaganda were strictly forbidden. It was impossible to hold public meetings, do ingathering, or advertise Sabbath services. However, while meeting in a church was forbidden, the small group of members faithfully continued to meet in each other's homes or in the open air. The group of 20 or so Adventist youth formed the Young People's Society and invited their non-Adventist friends to join the various social activities.^{45, 46}

Rebuilding the Church in the 1960s

Thirty years passed since WWI and the Adventists still did not have a building in which to worship.⁴⁷ Kevork Yesil was a church elder with many influential friends in the government. When Turkey applied in the early 1950s to be a NATO member, his friends advised the leaders that now was a good time to apply for permission to build a church. At the time, C. G. Rasmussen was president of Turkey Section. An application was submitted on official General Conference letterhead, and a few years later, in 1958, they were granted permission to build on the property in Taksim. Sixty or so Adventists were able to worship in the first church of its kind since 1923.^{48, 49} The city of Istanbul recognized it as a house of prayer.⁵⁰ In 1959 Manuk Benzatyan received his B.A. from Middle East College and returned as the first Turkish national pastor in more than a generation.

More international Adventists began to return. In 1961 Mondics served again as president of the Turkey Section for one year, while V. A. Fenn took up responsibilities as secretary/treasurer. Another American, L. C. Miller, was called to facilitate temperance work. Although there seemed to be more tolerance toward the Adventists, they were still faced with numerous obstacles and opposition from every angle.

In the fall of 1961, the General Conference sent a large shipment of flour, beans, rice, and powdered milk through the acronym CARE. One hundred poor and destitute families were chosen to receive food packages on a monthly basis, and many of those families began to attend church on Sabbaths.

In the summer of 1962, the first Vacation Bible School (VBS) was conducted by pastors Miller, Benzatyan, and their wives. Most of the children who attended were from among the 100 families receiving the care packages. A natural result of this VBS was the establishment of the first pathfinder club, and because of the benefits the children received from these programs, plans were made to organize more pathfinder clubs, vacation Bible schools, junior summer camps, and camp meetings.⁵¹

Adventist women were also active in the community. A Dorcas Society established around the same time operated for several years under the leadership of Miss Siranoush Chorbajian. They purchased food for orphans and needy families from the money raised by making and selling clothes, aprons, and pajamas.⁵² The ladies were also involved in the Church Women United organization in Istanbul and gathered regularly for prayer and fellowship with Christian women of many denominations.⁵³

An attempt was made during the 1960s to reestablish the medical work. A small clinic, offering mainly home nursing, was opened in 1964 and was managed by a young Turkish nurse, Hermine Gornig Tulgar. The clinic continued until 1973.

In 1962 L. C. Miller became secretary of the International Temperance Association.⁵⁴ Over the next decade he conducted numerous antismoking clinics, along with Benzatyan and H. C. Lamp (medical secretary of the Middle East Division). One highlight was a successful ten-day tour of the Izmir area in April 1964 when Benzatyan and Miller visited schools every day showing the temperance films "One in 20,000" and "Verdict at 1:32." The tours continued to central and eastern Turkey. Miller reported, "The response from civic leaders, educators, and students is tremendous and enthusiastic."⁵⁵ In March 1965 the first SDA radio broadcast in Turkey aired a temperance program at Bursa.⁵⁶

According to Cindy Walikonis, daughter of Miller, youth camps were a big deal between 1960 and 1970. Both Armenian Christian and Muslim kids attended the camps held at Lake Abant, located between Istanbul and Ankara. Even though Miller left in 1967 to be the ministerial secretary of the Middle East Division in Beirut, Lebanon, the camps continued to flourish for another three years until 1970. At that point the Turkish government began investigating in a threatening manner, and church leaders decided to stop the camps.⁵⁷

In 1968 Benzatyan became the first national president of the Turkey Section after 25 years of foreign leadership. In addition, his responsibilities included secretary/treasurer and departmental secretaries for Lay activities, Sabbath School, Youth and Temperance. Turkey was reorganized under the East Mediterranean Field in 1970 under the leadership of R. D. Piffer. It had one official church with 54 members.⁵⁸ Benzatyan continued as president of the Turkey Section until 1971, after which he returned to the United States when his young son died in a drowning accident.

The Gediz earthquake of March 28, 1970 in western Anatolia, Turkey, provided a chance for Adventists to be involved in humanitarian work. This devastating quake killed 1,086 people and heavily damaged 12,234 houses. Nothing was left standing. People were left without families and businesses were destroyed. Fred Waelti, head of the welfare work in the German-Swiss conference, connected with Benzatyan and offered their help. Within three days 16 tons of clothing and blankets arrived in Turkey from the Swiss Adventists. Waelit and Benzatyan connected with the Turkish Red Crescent Society and traveled with them to survey the area, take pictures, and assess the needs.⁵⁹

Lost Decades of the 1970s and 1980s

Through the beginning years of the 1970s, the church continued to be active with temperance work. However, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, political violence in Turkey from 1976 to 1980 and the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in 1978, the work once again came to a standstill over the next two decades. International workers and members alike left, either to other assignments or back to their home countries. Only one pastor, Ohannis Delice, remained to take care of the small church and the few remaining members.

Emphasis of the Adventist work now shifted to working from outside of the country. Turkish language cassettes were prepared and sold by literature evangelists to Turks living in Europe. A Bible correspondence school was conducted from Beirut, Lebanon, with lessons prepared in Turkish, and in 1974 Turkish radio broadcasts began from Adventist World Radio in Portugal.⁶⁰

During the 1980s church leadership from the East Mediterranean Field (EMF) visited the struggling church to offer support and encouragement to Pastor Delice and the few members. A camp for the disabled was held in the summer of 1987, but for the most part it was tough to make connections within the community. According to Basim Aziz (president of the EMF from 1985 to 1989), the lack of funds at both the union and field levels also made it difficult to conduct other activities on a wider level.⁶¹ The Bible Correspondence School, however, continued to operate out of Beirut.⁶²

In 1988 the Turkey Section was removed from the EMF and attached directly to the Middle East Union. In 1991 Delice was named section leader of the one and only church in Turkey and its eight members.⁶³

ADRA Work in Turkey

During the 1990s, Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA), under director Ralph Watts, became involved in an emergency relief effort to help the two million Kurdish refugees who fled to Turkey during the 1990 Gulf War. ADRA established a camp for 500 families and provided basic needs, food, and medical services.⁶⁴

When the devastating İzmit earthquake of 1999, also called Kocaeli earthquake or Gölcük earthquake, struck near the city of İzmit in northwestern Turkey on August 17, 1999, thousands of people were killed, and large parts of several mid-sized towns and cities were destroyed. Since ADRA International did not have an office in Turkey, they partnered with the ADRA Germany and Czech offices to provide hygiene kits and blankets, as well as assist with medical needs.⁶⁵

Again, on October 30, 2015, a powerful earthquake struck the Aegean Sea, causing most damage to Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey. This time the Seventh-day Adventist Foundation teamed up with ADRA to offer ground support and provide tents and warm meals for the homeless.⁶⁶

Rebuilding in the 20th Century

Even though the Adventist work in Turkey was launched in 1890, it began all over again a century later. In 1990 there was only one church, one pastor, and eight members. No materials were available, and there was virtually no training for pastors or Bible workers.⁶⁷ There continued to be constant struggles—never ending challenges, car accidents, earthquakes, and the threat of strong surveillance and adversity from many sides. Workers' lives were several times in danger. By 1994 anywhere from six to fifteen people worshiped in the two-story building that housed the Adventist Church in Istanbul.

As church administration looked toward the future, they realized that more low-key, non-traditional methods of interacting with the local community were necessary due to the national and religious prejudices of those that lived in the country. Therefore, living witness combined with personal contact became the predominant method to dispelling centuries of prejudice.

Adventist lay professionals developed friendships with their coworkers at the office. An Adventist doctor did a residency in a Turkish hospital where he and his wife also devoted their time and energies to developing the "Friends of Turkey" network that prayed for the mission of the church. Another Adventist couple worked for one of the foreign embassies in Ankara. They made a career of working in difficult countries around the world for the express purpose of reaching out. Others participated in expeditions to locate Noah's Ark. They developed relationships with high government officials including navy and military personnel. These friendships proved beneficial when permission was granted for ADRA to operate among the Kurdish refugees who fled to the mountains on the Turkish border during the Gulf War of 1992.⁶⁸

In October of 1993 an English language school opened in Izmir and was staffed by Adventist lay professionals who joined with an American couple stationed at the naval base in Izmir.

Adventist lay professionals mixed with all levels of society, the upper end over lunch or dinner at high class restaurants, as well as with the lower class around a cup of chai in the bazaar. Other groups also met with intellectuals who were seriously studying the Noble Koran and the Holy Bible side by side on CD-ROM.⁶⁹

In 1995 the Turkey Section became part of the Trans-Mediterranean Territories (MISSERM), an attached field of the Euro-Africa Division. Sylvain Romain assumed leadership as field president, and Delice continued as director of the Turkey Section, as well as pastor of the Istanbul Church.

A year later, the church in Istanbul welcomed over one hundred refugees from Iraq, many of them coming with the hope to reach a third country. In 1998 four volunteers from Romania came to help reach university students in and around Izmir. In 1999 several pastors belonging to the Turkish-speaking minorities in Bulgaria and Moldova came to Istanbul to track possible SDA members among the millions of Romanian and Russian immigrants in the metropolis. The result was an impressive growth of attendance and the opening of a second church in Kadiköy (Asian side of Istanbul), an empty Catholic building in almost perfect condition that was graciously handed over by the municipality.⁷⁰

Over the course of time, a few Protestant churches dropped their prejudice toward Adventists and gave support in the translation and printing of Adventist classic books like *Steps to Christ*, *The Desire of Ages*, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Prophets and Kings*, and *The Great Controversy*. They also offered their support in the hosting of radio programs and helped with obtaining residence permits for foreign workers.

The influx of foreigners, however, had a negative effect on the church and on the Turkish members and their friends as they felt like a neglected minority in their own country. Another drawback was that the nationals still despised some nationalities while welcoming others, which was not so good for some but good for others.

Sylvain Romain writes: "We may conclude that despite the better ways of communications and easier life, Asia Minor is still the challenge it was during the apostolic time."⁷¹

Challenges of the 21st Century

At the beginning of the 21st century the biggest hurdle still to overcome was the refusal of the Turkish government to recognize the Seventh-day Adventist Church, making it illegal to worship as a Christian even in homes. As in previous decades, the only outreach was limited to personal contact. The groups did not have pastors and when gathering at homes, there was always the risk of being arrested.⁷²

Leaders continued to find alternate ways in which to interact with the community. An Adventist health association was founded at the turn of the millennium that operated health seminars and expos. A high volume of participants gave opportunities for the church members to develop friendships. In August of 2004 a supporting ministry team from the United States hosted a successful stop-smoking and blood pressure booth at the International Fair.⁷³

Also, in 2004, Media Ministry, operating from Colognes, France, opened a studio in Izmir and launched a radio program. Programs were broadcasted through AWR on shortwave and on the AWR official Web site as podcasts. In 2009 Hope Channel began producing TV programs through satellite.⁷⁴

In 2006 the first legal publishing work was established in the country by the same supporting ministry mentioned previously. Translation of several popular books including *The Richest Caveman* (Doug Batchelor's story), *Gifted Hands* (Ben Carson's story), *A Thousand Shall Fall*, and *Trip into the Supernatural* were prepared and outsourced to a publishing company. In addition several major works of Ellen White including *Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessings*, and others were also translated and prepared for publishing. Over the next decade a series of video stories for children with puppets was produced among other materials.⁷⁵

Through private donations the publishing team was able to buy a high-end color photocopy machine and a cutting table, creating a small print shop for publishing various tracts and materials.

From 2004 to 2006 a home group began meeting in Izmir. By 2008 the group had grown to about twenty persons on Sabbaths, and the church attempted to apply for a legal association in Turkey. Members were ecstatic when the Turkish government granted approval in 2009 to operate as an "Association" under the name "Smyrna Sonsuz Yaşam Derneği Kilisesi," or "The Eternal Life Church Association." In preparation for that, a rental apartment was gutted and made into a church in the Basmane center of Izmir, across from the International Fair grounds. Thus began a new era for the church as members could worship freely on Sabbath, as well as host other events such as prayer meetings and health-related seminars.⁷⁶

A serious setback for the church occurred in the early 2000s when the government forced the Taksim Church to close due to a property dispute. Members had to change their place of worship to the basement of the four-storey complex located on the same property. It took almost twenty years of court proceedings and legal battles for the property, church and office building in Taksim to be registered, on February 16, 2019, under the name of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.⁷⁷

Despite all the challenges, the second decade of the 21st century witnessed an increase in both church groups and members. In 2012 the Turkey Field was renamed the Turkey & North Cyprus Field (TNCF) under the Middle East and North Africa Union. By that time there were three organized churches (Taksim, Kadiköy, and Izmir) and one company for a total of 96 members.⁷⁸

In theory, even though members were now at liberty to worship openly, in practice they still faced opposition from the other religions. Church leaders continued to develop innovative ways for members to associate with the community. In 2013 a support center for refugees fleeing from neighboring countries was established in Adana. Over the following years music, language lessons, and health courses were offered for free, and in 2017 Farsi camp meetings began operating yearly for the families.

On the Asian side of Istanbul in the courtyard of the Kadiköy Church, beautiful posters were hung in sequence around the walls, presenting a photo story of Creation through restoration. Visitors, to this day, can walk through free-of-charge after passing by a sidewalk bookcase outside the entrance of the courtyard that stacks SDA books and literature.⁷⁹

In 2013 young Adventist international students came to study in Turkish public universities. They learned the language and culture, giving them the opportunity to mingle and build relationships with their classmates and teachers. Over the following years more students from other countries came to study and find personal ways to blend in and be an encouragement to those around them.⁸⁰

In a similar attempt to meet the public, five Adventist families arrived in the country in 2015 with the intention of bringing an infusion of talent and leadership to the Turkey Field. They were professionally trained couples who were able to function within the secular market or in service capacities to become part of their community and build relationships.⁸¹

At this point the Adventist Church as a denomination was still not recognized by the Turkish government. In October 2013, a court process was begun to establish the TNCF Foundation under the name “Yedinci Gün Adventistleri Vakfi.” What the church had been anticipating for over a century was finally realized on February 1, 2016 when the Turkish court approved the foundation under the name “Adventist Vakfi.” The Adventist Church as an “organization” now has a legitimate presence in the country and can provide for the lawful registration of its churches and other entities to operate under its “umbrella.”⁸² This was a major step forward for the Turkey-North Cyprus Field.

The TNCF went through two more name changes in 2015 and 2017, the final one being the West Asia Field. As of the end of the first quarter of 2022, there are currently six churches and five companies for a total membership of 596.⁸³

Conclusion

Turkey today is full of vibrant young people, budding artists, and thriving metropolitan areas popular with foreign tourists. The Adventist Church in this beautiful and historic nation still faces secularism and intolerance from other Christian and non-Christian leaders. Ministry is just as challenging as it has been for years. The majority population is non-Christian, and opportunities for church growth are infrequent. With the tremendous losses of the church in the early 20th century, the setbacks have been insurmountable.⁸⁴

Organization

From 1890 to 1898 the work in Turkey was under the supervision of the Central European Mission. Then for three years it was under the Central European Union. In 1901 it became part of the Oriental Union Mission (along with Egypt and Syria) of the European General Conference. Later in 1908 it was under the Levant Union Mission, and headquarters of the LUM were moved from Hamburg, Germany to Constantinople. Between 1917 to 1920 there was no organized mission. In 1923 the Levant Union was dissolved into separate fields responsible directly to the European Division. In 1928 Turkey was a mission under the Central European Division; then

during World War II this was one of the missions for which the General Conference was directly responsible. In 1950 the Turkey Mission Field came under the East Mediterranean Union of the Middle East Division, and then in 1970 under the East Mediterranean Field of Middle East Union of the Afro Mideast Division. In 1988 Turkey Section was removed from East Mediterranean Field and attached directly to Middle East Union. In 1995 it was reshuffled as an attached Field of the Trans Mediterranean Territories under the Euro-Africa Division, and then in 2012 as the Turkey-North Cyprus Field of the Middle East and North Africa Union directly attached to the General Conference. It was renamed the Turkey-Iran Field in 2015 and in 2017 once again renamed the West Asia Field.⁸⁵

Caretakers/Superintendents/Directors

A.W. George (1904-1906); C. D. AcMoody (1908 to 1909); E. E. Frauchiger (1909-1917);⁸⁶ Zadour Baharian (1911-1915);⁸⁷ Henry Erzberger (1921-1923)⁸⁸; M. Grin (1924 to 1925); A. H. Larson (1926-1928); Fred Backer (1929-1937); F. F. Oster (1939-1944); A. E. Ashod (Acting, 1945-1948);⁸⁹ B. J. Mondics (1949-1952); C. G. Rasmussen (1953-1960); B. J. Mondics (1961 to 1962); L. C. Miller (1963-1967); Manuk Benzatyan (1968-1971); Ohannis Delice (1972, 1991-1999); Sylvain Romain (2000⁹⁰); Johnny Manassian (2002 to 2003); Erkin Altinkaynak (2006 to 2007); Reynolds Agatha (2008-2010);⁹¹ Erkin Altinkaynak (2011); Daniel Nae (2013-2015); Hyosu Jung (2015-Present).

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