

Afro-Mideast Division (1970–1981)

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The Afro-Mideast Division was a large unit of church organization in the Middle East and eastern Africa that existed from 1970 to 1981.

Territory and Statistics

The territory of the Afro-Mideast Division included the Arab Republic of Egypt, Bahrain, Cyprus, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Libya, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Sultanate of Oman, Syria, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen Arab Republic; comprising the East African, Middle East, and Tanzania Unions; and the Ethiopian Union Mission. The division started in 1970 with 641 churches and 114,090 members in a population of 198,128,583¹ At the end of its existence in 1981, the statistics showed 1,108 churches and 218,550 members in a population of 274,275,958.²

Organizational History

At the beginning of 1969, the East African Union became detached from the Trans-Africa Division because of the political environment in Africa.³ This union, comprising the countries of Uganda, Kenya, and what was then the British crown colony of Seychelles,⁴ became, instead, a detached field administered by the General Conference, an administrative model that benefitted neither entity.⁵ At that time, the union administration—F. G. Reid, president, W. M. Webster; treasurer; and K. K. Bazarra, executive secretary—served a membership just shy of 70,000, and the union had two educational institutions and two hospitals as well as numerous dispensaries and clinics.⁶

At the request of the General Conference Committee, Elder Robert H. Pierson, president of the General Conference (from June 16, 1966 to January 3, 1979), and Elder W. R. Beach, the General Conference executive secretary, traveled to Europe and Africa in late 1969 to gather information from the church administrators and members in that region and discuss making changes to the organization.⁷

At the 51st General Conference Session in Atlantic City, New Jersey, United States of America, Elder Robert H. Pierson, in his address to the delegates on the afternoon of June 15, 1970, informed them that their investigation found that the Tanzania Union was very closely associated with the East African Union because they share a common ethnic and political backgrounds, and that the countries comprising these unions along with the nearby country of Ethiopia were tied together “ethnically, linguistically, and religiously.”⁸

Based on their findings, Elder W. R. Beach recommended a new organization of the division: “That the territory of the Middle East Division and the East African Union, and the following territories in the Trans-Africa Division and the Northern European Division be organized into a new division to include the Middle East Union, Ethiopian Union, East African Union, Tanzania Union.”⁹ He proposed that this new organization should commence on January 1, 1971, and that the details concerning the division name and the location of its headquarters should be determined by the new division committee, and that their recommendations and any other details would be reviewed and approved by the General Conference Committee.¹⁰

After supportive statements by the presidents of the three divisions being affected, the General Conference in session voted almost unanimously in favor of the recommendations.¹¹

The administration for the new division was subsequently voted and put in place: as president, Elder M. E. Lind, who had been the secretary of the Trans-Africa Division and had much experience in East Africa; R. L. Jacobs, secretary; and C. E. Schmidt, treasurer.¹²

A few days later, on June 19, 1970, the new division committee met in Atlantic City. The committee named the new division the Afro-Mideast Division (AMD).¹³

To have a fair representation from all four of the unions that the division comprised, men of experience from these unions were elected. The heads of the departments were determined as follows: Robert Darnell, from the former Middle East Division, was made head of the Education, Public Relations, and Religious Liberty departments. Harold Sheffield, also from the former Middle East division, was made secretary of the Health and Temperance departments. Elder A. H. Brandt, who had been president and public relations department secretary of the East Denmark Conference, was named secretary of the Lay Activities and Missionary Volunteer departments. George Rainey, who had been the associate ministerial department secretary of the Atlantic Union Conference in the North American Division, was sent to be the Ministerial department secretary. R. H. Henning, who had been the Radio-TV department secretary in the Tanzania Union, was given the Publishing and Radio-TV departments. The secretary for the Sabbath School department was Bekele Heye from the Ethiopia Union, where he had been secretary of the Publishing and Sabbath School departments. D. K. Bazarra from the East Africa Union was made Stewardship secretary.¹⁴

The institutions were an important part of the life and work of the church in the countries of the new Afro-Mideast Division. In his report of the formation of the new division, the editor of the *Middle East Messenger*, Robert Darnell, described the significance of these institutions:

Middle East College is the only senior college in the new division. It is expected that it will continue to operate as a division institution. Other schools of higher learning in the division are the Ethiopian Adventist College at Kuyera in Shoa Province, Ethiopia, and Bugema Missionary College, near Kampala, Uganda. Middle East College famous for its bread, will be joined in the division by the Ethiopian Adventist College, whose farms in 1969 produced 600 tons of wheat.

Three publishing houses will serve the territory: The Middle East Press in Beirut, the Ethiopian Advent Press in Addis Ababa, and The African Herald Publishing House in Kenya. These publish four periodicals: "Hope" and "Call to Health" in Arabic, "The Advent Messenger" in Amharic and English, and "Listen" in Swahili. Sabbath School quarterlies are published in various languages. Among those used by the African Herald Publishing House are Kalenjin, Kinyarwanda, Kisii, Luganda, Luhya, Luo, Lutoro, Sukuma, Tigre, and Tigrinia. The major languages in use in the new division are Amharic, Arabic, Persian, Swahili, and Turkish. Both the Middle East Press and The African Herald Publishing House have annual retail sales of more than \$100,000, with the African house as leader with close to \$120,000.

Hospitals in the division furnish nearly 500 beds. The largest has been the 123-bed Kendu Hospital in Kenya. In Addis Ababa a new five-story building is to be opened on July 3 to house the Empress Zauditu Hospital. Other larger hospitals are the Ishaka Hospital in Mbarara, Uganda, and the Heri Hospital in Kigoma, Tanzania. The Ethiopia Union has the largest number of hospitals, including the 65-bed Gimbie Hospital in Gimbie, Wollega province, and the Haile Selassie I Hospital in Taffari Makonnen Hospital in Dessie, Debre Tabor, Begemder province.

An important health education school is located at Kigoma, Tanzania, in connection with work at Heri Hospital. The Empress Zauditu Hospital operates a school of nursing. There are 15 clinics and dispensaries in East Africa, 14 in Tanzania, 5 in Ethiopia and 2 in the Middle East. A Cessna 206 airplane helps to serve special needs in Tanzania.

Education work is well developed all over the field, but especially in the East Africa Union. The latest comparative report available showed that this union had 166 elementary schools with an enrollment of 24,902 at the end of 1968. The four unions together had 264 schools with 40,872 students on the elementary level. There were 27 secondary schools with 2,657 students. A third of the secondary schools were in the Middle East.¹⁵

Among the institutions that played a positive role in the work of the church in the Afro-Mideast Division, the Matariah Mercy Home orphanage, in a suburb of Cairo, Egypt, is also worth mentioning.¹⁶

As already mentioned, the location of the division headquarters was referred to the new division committee to decide in consultation with the General Conference Committee. It was obvious that most of the churches, members, activities, and opportunities were in East Africa, so one of the stipulations was that the headquarters should eventually be placed in Africa. However, with the termination of the Middle East Division, the former

division compound with its offices in Beirut, Lebanon, was available and was chosen as a temporary location.¹⁷ Available AMD committee members in Beirut, R. L. Jacobs, R. C. Darnell, C. E. Schmidt, and H. N. Sheffield, formed a caucus and met, sometimes with invitees from the local field, to take care of urgent and practical issues.¹⁸

When the division president, M. E. Lind, was on site and chaired the meeting on September 8, housing was assigned on the division compound to officers and departmental directors and their families.¹⁹ Soon the personnel were settled in and could focus on their travels and assignments.

Already after a few months there was a change in the departments, when R. C. Darnell was asked to be the president of the new Middle East Union. In fact, there seems to have been a quick turnover of departmental directors during the time that Afro-Mideast Division existed. This trend may indicate the complexity of the division territory, the need for representation of the unions, and training of nationals for leadership as well as economic and other considerations.

The official organ was the Afro-Mideast Division *Impact*.²⁰ It was first published in 1971 and shared news and inspirational articles at least until 1977, or as long as the division operated from Beirut.²¹

There were many issues to deal with. The unions of the division were all union missions with several interdivision workers to help staff organizations and institutions and were therefore to a great extent dependent on the counsel, financial support, and approval of major decisions. Political tension in some areas;²² school riots,²³ workers' furloughs, and personal issues called for new workers that all needed the attention of the division leaders. Likewise, contacts to be made to the Ministry of Social Affairs and permissions for the AMD to operate in the host country had to be taken care of.²⁴ Elder M. E. Lind, himself an inspiring speaker and leader,²⁵ put his coordinated plan for evangelism, "Forward Thrust," into action right from the start of his term.²⁶ His nearly 30 years of missionary experience in Africa had taught him to move forward in faith regardless of the seemingly insurmountable challenges. And the evangelistic thrust paid off.

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), which started with the assassination attempt on the Maronite Christian Phalangist leader Pierre Gemayel,²⁷ naturally affected the administration and work of the AMD as it did that of the Middle East Union and the East Mediterranean Field.²⁸ In the first years of the war, the division was able to carry on its administrative work without major problems. But as the situation escalated, it became more difficult to travel and increasingly risky to move around in Beirut. Elder Borge Schantz,²⁹ AMD Lay Activities and Youth director, was known to ignore these risks and bring people to and from the airport, crossing the "Green Line"³⁰ while avoiding the bullets and shrapnel that might be flying around. The local people lived with the risks of war every day.

As the war situation tightened and the postal services became more and more unreliable, the AMD found it expedient to open a provisional postal address in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 1976.³¹ Officers or other personnel from

the division, union, or field would make regular trips to Cyprus and hand carry the mail and do other necessary business. In February 1977, it was decided that the AMD departmental directors would serve as Middle East Union directors for a period of two years.³²

It became more and more obvious that it was no longer safe to stay in Beirut, not even at the division compound. The warring factions were closing in on Sabtieh Hill, where the Adventist offices, schools, and church buildings were located. In some cases, the army would commandeer private property to have better shooting positions.³³ Straying rockets could fall anytime on the division offices and living quarters and cause not only material damage but also loss of life. People would go to the bomb shelters when the shooting became intense. Keeping the division operation going from Lebanon became increasingly difficult. On October 12, 1978, Dr. Kooreny, the president of Middle East College, called a faculty meeting at six thirty in the morning, before the classes began, to share a telex that he and most likely also the division and union presidents had received from the General Conference. He said,

“This morning we are to discuss these orders from the General Conference, which Dr. Riggs hand-carried from Cyprus last evening. I will read its content to you, and then we must decide what we will do.” . . .

“We are advised to (1) move Division to Nicosia (Cyprus); (2) move Union to Amman (Jordan); move Middle East College to Cairo (Egypt); (4) evacuate women and children at once; (5) secure the properties.”³⁴

It seems, however, that the leadership in the General Conference may have been more urgent in setting the moves in action than the people on site in Lebanon. There was no immediate execution of the orders but, no doubt, busy counseling activity among the church entities in Beirut.

The treasurer of the division, E. J. Gregg, had been to Nicosia to investigate the possibilities for new office space there. With this information, the division committee met under the chairmanship of the president, Elder C. D. Watson, and decided it was time to move the office, personnel, and families temporarily to Cyprus. The request of the committee was sent to the General Conference, and on November 9, 1978, the General Conference Committee voted to allow the AMD to temporarily move the division offices to Nicosia, Cyprus, and to purchase a high-rise apartment building to house those offices with division funds that the General Conference held.³⁵

Shortly after, the division family moved, and the new location of the Afro-Mideast Division office became 3 Homer Avenue, fifth floor, Nicosia, Cyprus.³⁶ The new arrangement worked well for the time being. There was easy access to international travel, the banking and postal services were much better, and the security situation was certainly improved. But everyone knew that it was only a temporary solution and a transition period for the eventual move to Africa as stipulated at the organization of the division in 1970.

The first clear indication that a move of the division offices to an East African country was about to happen was the election of an African-born division president. At the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas, Texas, U.S.A., Elder Bekele Heye from Ethiopia was elected as the new AMD president.³⁷

The discussion among the members and leaders on the African continent had long been going on that there was a need to bring the headquarters closer to where the action was—that is, the African continent. Already, in the first half of the 1970s, correspondence from the African fields to Elder R. H. Pierson and the rest of the General Conference leadership expressed a strong desire for change in the organization of the work in Africa.

Specifically,

It expressed the viewpoint that our present division organization was not viewed favorably by many SDA Africans, nor by some African governments, since it gives the appearance, at least in some aspects, of holdover colonialism. Some of our African leaders and constituents also felt that the location of division headquarters in Europe and the Middle East prevented adequate opportunity for Africans to participate in leadership roles in our strongly developing African work.

The viewpoint was expressed that our African members would be challenged to take greater responsibility for the development of our work if the headquarters were located among them where they could participate more fully in leadership. Moreover, it was asserted that at present the division leaders are located too far away to be able to give adequate leadership to the work in Africa.³⁸

As a result of these viewpoints, Elder Pierson visited the African fields and held consultations in various places. In 1976 an African Study Committee was appointed, and after extensive study of the matter, the committee reported to the President's Executive Advisory and a group of officers from divisions with territory in Africa. These consultations and meetings resulted in a recommendation that was brought to the 1979 Annual Council and then to the 1980 General Conference Session. The reorganization of the Seventh-day Adventist work on the African continent was voted in principle by the General Conference in session. In July 1981, R. R. Drachenberg, R. F. Williams, and the AMD officers assessed the situation and looked at the problem of relocating the headquarters as well as other problems. It was clear that locating the headquarters in Africa for furthering the work there was the optimal solution, and some departmental staff moved to Nairobi, Kenya.

Another problem that was studied was that the Middle East Union of the AMD was not growing—in fact, the membership there was declining—so that area needed different arrangements to foster growth.

As a result of these circumstances and the study findings, at the General Conference Annual Council on October 8, 1981. The following action was passed:

VOTED, To restructure the Afro-Mideast Division to include all the present territory with the exception of the territory of the Middle East Union.

2. To attach the Middle East Union to the General Conference until some other desirable solution can be found.
3. To change the name of the Afro-Mideast Division to Eastern Africa Division.
4. To designate Nairobi, Kenya, as the location of the Eastern Africa Division headquarters.

5. To recognize this arrangement as temporary in harmony with the 53rd General Conference Session (1980) action stipulating that a review of the organizational structure in Africa be conducted at the 1984 Annual Council (GCS 1980, Bulletin 29).

6. To authorize this arrangement to become effective, January 1, 1982.

7. To refer the negotiations and details in connection with these changes to the General Conference Officers and the General Conference Committee including the following:

a. Separation of budgets; distribution of assets, reserves, Retirement Fund; distribution of interdivision workers and worker budgets.

b. Final decision in regard to whether or not the Sudan should remain in the territory of the Middle East Union.

c. Disposition of the General Conference–owned property in Lebanon.

8. To authorize the General Conference Officers and General Conference Committee to implement this action.³⁹

This action ended the era of the Afro-Mideast Division. As known from the beginning, the AMD was a temporary solution. The situation at the time demanded a setup that could give strong and effective leadership and support to the East African churches with their great potential for growth and need for training as well as to the Middle East region with its unique challenges in a primarily Muslim context. In a changing world, the church will always have to adapt to the new challenges and possibilities that present themselves.

Executive Officers Chronology⁴⁰

Presidents: M. E. Lind (1970–1974); E. W. Pedersen (1974–1975); C. D. Watson (1975–1980); Bekele Heye (1980–1981).

Secretaries: R. L. Jacobs (1970–1975); M. T. Battle (1975–1977); F. G. Thomas (1977–1981).

Treasurers: C. E. Schmidt (1970–1976); E. J. Gregg (1976–1981).

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NOTES

1. “Afro-Mideast Division,” *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1971), 97.

2. “Afro-Mideast Division,” *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1981), 127.

3. M. E. Kemmerer, "East Africa, Southern Asia Study Financial Methods," *ARH*, August 21, 1969, 32.
4. "East African Union," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1970), 290.
5. "Seventh Business Meeting, June 15, 1970, 3:00 P.M.," *ARH*, June 16, 1970, 21.
6. "East African Union," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1970, 290; "Institutions: East African Union," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1970, 292-293.
7. "Seventh Business Meeting," 21.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. 21-22.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 22.
12. "New Division Formed in East Africa and West Asia to include Middle East; M. E. Lind Is President," *Middle East Messenger* 19, no. 3 (July-August 1970): 1.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.; "Afro-Mideast Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971), 97; "New Division Formed in East Africa and West," 1, 3.
15. Ibid., 3.
16. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed. (1996), s.v. "Afro-Mideast Division." For more detailed information, see s.v. "Matariah Mercy Home."
17. Minutes of the General Conference Committee, October 8, 1981, 81-284, General Conference Archives, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1981-10.pdf>.
18. Minutes of the Officers Meeting of the Afro-Mideast Division, August 4, 1970-September 8, 1970, a-i, General Conference Archives, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/AMD/AMD19700801.pdf>.
19. Ibid. September 8, 1970, 3.

20. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed. (1996), s.v. "Afro-Mideast Division."
21. Manoug Nazirian, "Preface," in *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lebanon 1897–1997*, ed. Manoug Nazirian (Beirut: The East Mediterranean Field of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999), 7.
22. Minutes of the Officers Meeting of the Afro-Mideast Division, May 26, 1971 (71-73), General Conference Archives, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/AMD/AMD19710501.pdf>.
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24. Minutes of the Officers Meeting of the Afro-Mideast Division, March 24, 1971 (71-61), General Conference Archives, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/AMD/AMD19710301.pdf>.
25. Sven Hagen Jensen, personal knowledge by listening to Elder Lind at camp meetings in Scandinavia and visiting him and the Brandt family at the division compound in Beirut in 1971 on a tour to the Bible lands.
26. Minutes of the Middle East Union Committee, December 16, 1970, Middle East North Africa Union Mission Archives, Beirut, Lebanon.
27. Pierre Tristan, "Timeline of the Lebanese Civil war, 1975–1990," *ThoughtCo*, last updated January 23, 2019, <https://thoughtco.com/timeline-of-the-lebanese-civil-war-2>.
28. It has been difficult to document the work of the AMD during its time of operation and especially through the war years, since only few primary sources exist. No AMD committee minutes can be found, only the officers meetings minutes 1970–1972. Likewise, no copies of *Impact* exist unless they are found in private collections. It is suspected that it all was lost in the bombings of the division buildings and the hasty evacuation from Lebanon. The information then to a great extent had to be collected from Middle East Union committee minutes and other sources.
29. Borge Schantz was from Denmark and served as East Mediterranean Field president 1974–1976 and as AMD Lay Activities and Youth director 1976–1980.
30. "The Green Line was the line of demarcation in Beirut, Lebanon, during the Lebanese Civil War. . . . It separated the mainly Muslim factions in predominantly Muslim West Beirut from the predominantly Christian East Beirut controlled by the Lebanese Front." Wikipedia, s.v. "Green Line," last modified July 23, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Line_\(Lebanon\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Line_(Lebanon)).
31. "Afro-Mideast Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 107.
32. Minutes of the Middle East Union Session, February 1–2, 1977, Middle East North Africa Union Mission Archives, Beirut, Lebanon.

33. Violet Wentland, *On the Edge of the Battlefield: A College Struggles in War-Torn Lebanon* (Enumclaw, Wash.: WinePress, 2012), 53–65.

34. *Ibid.*, 180.

35. Minutes of the General Conference Committee, November 9, 1978, 78-414, General Conference Archives,
<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1978-11.pdf>.

36. "Afro-Mideast Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1979), 113.

37. "Fourth Business Meeting, April 20, 1980, Sunday Morning," *ARH*, April 21, 1980, 32.

38. "Session Actions: Reorganization of African Affairs," *ARH*, April 20, 1980, 28.

39. Minutes of the General Conference Committee, October 8, 1981, 81-284, General Conference Archives,
<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1981-10.pdf>.

40. "Afro-Mideast Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1970–1981. <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

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