

Seventh-day Adventists and Other Christians in Tanzania

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When Seventh-day Adventist missionaries arrived in [Tanzania](#), then called German East Africa, in 1903,¹ Tanzania was already a multi-denominational mission field, a home to Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Moravians. Adventists were assigned three main territories—South Pare, Sukuma land, and the Mara region—and only later extended their work to other parts of the country.²

From the beginning, Adventists in Tanzania lived and worked alongside other Christian communities. On one hand, they understood themselves as a prophetic, end-time movement whose biblical distinctives (such as the seventh-day Sabbath) could not be compromised. On the other hand, they did not want to be isolated, but to be recognized as fellow Christians, sharing core convictions such as the Trinity, salvation through Christ, and the authority of Scripture. This balancing between cooperation and differentiation has shaped Adventist relationships with other Christians in Tanzania for more than a century.

Theological Identity and Early Adventist Self-understanding

Early Tanzanian Adventists saw themselves as standing in continuity with the apostolic church and the Protestant Reformation. They shared with other churches the confession of the Godhead, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the importance of conversion and holy living. At the same time, they emphasized such distinctive doctrines as the second coming of Christ, the state of the dead, the holiness of the seventh-day Sabbath, and Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.³

In the Tanzanian context, the teaching on the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments, especially Sabbath observance, and the strong emphasis on the imminence of Christ's return created visible differences from other Christian groups. Over time, these doctrinal distinctives contributed to a growing sense of denominational identity and sometimes distance from other Christians. Nevertheless, early mission leaders often gave both general Christian teachings and Adventist distinctives considerable weight in their preaching and instruction.

Adventists and Other Christians under German Rule, 1903–1914

Under German colonial administration, new mission societies were normally forbidden to enter areas officially assigned to another denomination. Within this framework, Adventists and other churches, particularly the Lutherans, developed relationships marked by courtesy and mutual visits.⁴

In the Kilimanjaro and Usambara regions, Adventists at Giti Mamba Station coexisted with Lutherans, who operated stations at Lutindi (Usambara) and Shigatini (Pare). In 1904, Adventist leader Ludwig R. Conradi paid a friendly visit to Lutheran missions, recognizing the need to cooperate within the colonial comity system.⁵ By 1909, mutual visits were common; Conradi invited Lutheran missionaries such as Bodelschwingh and inspector Trittelwitz of the Bethel Mission to visit Adventist stations.

The highest degree of practical cooperation appeared during World War I, when Adventist missionaries were interned and some received shelter and assistance at the Lutheran Bethel Mission in Usambara.⁶ These experiences suggest that Adventists and Lutherans in Tanzania maintained a relationship of goodwill, even while pursuing their own evangelistic goals.

Encounter under British Rule, 1920s–1960s

After Germany's defeat, Tanganyika came under British mandate. British officials were initially reluctant to readmit the Seventh-day Adventists, associating them with the earlier German regime. This led Adventist leaders to cooperate more openly with other churches where possible.⁷

During the 1920s and 1930s, Adventists sometimes drew on resources from other denominations. In Sukuma areas, for example, Adventist congregations used Africa Inland Church hymns translated into Sukuma. Yet, as African leadership developed within Adventism, emphasis on distinctive doctrines grew stronger, and early attitudes of comity gave way to denominational competition for converts and territory. Lutheran observers such as the Leipzig Mission complained that Adventist evangelism targeted their members, and Adventist reports occasionally spoke of Lutheran believers recognizing “deficiencies” in their own teaching when they studied the Bible with Adventists.⁸

At the same time, church/state collaboration opened new opportunities. British officials permitted Adventists to conduct the Harvest Ingathering program, in which they collected funds from both Christians and non-Christians to support Adventist medical, educational, and welfare work.⁹ This suggested a measure of public recognition and, indirectly, cooperation with other Christian agencies serving society.

Nevertheless, competition for “souls and territories” increasingly characterized relationships, especially with Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In some regions, such as Ukerewe in the 1930s, Catholic chiefs and clergy opposed Adventist expansion and favored their own missions when allocating land and influence.¹⁰

Post-independence Relations, 1960s–2000s

After independence in the early 1960s, leadership in both church and state passed increasingly to Tanzanians. Up to that time, Adventist work had remained concentrated in South Pare, Sukuma Land, and the Mara region, but now it expanded more widely. Several factors favored this growth: Support from local chiefs and community leaders, the relative absence of initiation rituals that hindered conversion in some ethnic groups, limited persecution of new Adventist believers, and the presence of capable African teachers and lay leaders.¹¹

In many places, Adventists depended on the goodwill of other churches for worship space. In Shinyanga town, for example, a group of Adventist believers without a building requested the use of an Anglican church. The Anglicans granted them permission to worship on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sabbaths, while retaining the building for Sunday services. Later, Adventists moved to a Roman Catholic hall, until they could build their own church.¹² Such arrangements illustrate practical Christian fellowship at the local level, in which Adventists and other Christians recognized each other as partners in evangelism, even without formal theological dialogue.

At the same time, the Adventist Church in Tanzania repeatedly declined membership in the Christian Council of Tanzania. Leaders feared that joining national ecumenical structures might compromise the Church's freedom to preach its apocalyptic message and distinctive doctrines. Thus, Adventists maintained a position of selective cooperation: willing to collaborate in social and humanitarian efforts, but cautious about alliances that might blur their identity.¹³

Selected Case Studies of Cooperation and Tension

Several episodes since the 1980s illustrate both the possibilities and limits of Adventist relations with other Christians in Tanzania.

World Vision projects in Bukoba and Singida. In the 1980s, World Vision Tanzania offered financial support to the Adventist Church in Bukoba for an orphanage project. Although the offer included a noble cause, the church leaders feared that accepting these funds would prevent the church from running the orphanage according to Adventist values and principles, and the project was not realized.¹⁴

A similar opportunity in Singida in 1983 had a different outcome. World Vision again offered a grant, this time to establish a flour mill to serve the community for five years before full ownership passed to the Adventists. Under the leadership of Pastor John Moses Kivunge, the Singida Church accepted the project and cooperated with World Vision until the mill was self-supporting.¹⁵

Violent clashes at Mbagala, Dar es Salaam, 2012. On October 12, 2012, riots erupted in Mbagala after a 14-year-old boy desecrated a Qur'an. Extremist Muslims attacked several churches, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church at Kizuiani and nearby Lutheran, Anglican, and Pentecostal congregations.¹⁶ Even though their own building was damaged, Adventists at Kizuiani organized a visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Church at Mbagala, bringing a monetary gift and words of sympathy. Their decision to prioritize the needs of fellow Christians,

despite their own losses, demonstrated a practical sense of solidarity in suffering.

Slaughtering rights controversy, 2013. Long-standing practice in many parts of Tanzania allowed Muslim butchers to control the slaughter of livestock for public markets, generating both religious prestige and income. When some Christian groups began to challenge this monopoly and insisted on their own right to slaughter animals, clashes erupted in Tunduma, Mwanza, and Geita, including the killing of a Pentecostal pastor.¹⁷ While some Christians urged equal slaughtering rights, Adventist leaders publicly counseled restraint. They argued that, since meat sold in the market is suitable for Christians, Adventists could avoid unnecessary conflict by refraining from entering the political struggle over butchery.¹⁸

Zanzibar church cooperation, 2008–2016. On the predominantly Muslim islands of Zanzibar, Christian groups have faced severe difficulty in acquiring land for church buildings. In Nungwi, Adventists worshiped for eight years in a Roman Catholic church building (2008–2016) until they completed their own structure. When the Catholic congregation later lost legal title to its property and premises, it approached the Adventists for permission to worship in the new Adventist Church. The Adventists granted the request.¹⁹

In addition, Lutherans and Pentecostals in Zanzibar have invited Adventist choirs to participate in interdenominational music events, and Adventists have reciprocated by inviting Catholic and Lutheran choirs to Adventist campmeetings. Such shared musical ministry has strengthened relationships and shown a more open face of Adventism to other Christians.

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists in Tanzania have consistently sought to hold an intermediate position between isolation and absorption. The ongoing challenge for Adventists in Tanzania is to maintain faithfulness to their biblical convictions while cultivating relationships of respect, service, and mutual witness with the wider Christian community. From the start, Adventists affirmed core Christian doctrines shared with other churches while maintaining distinctive teachings—especially prophetic interpretation and Sabbath observance—that often set them apart. Competition for converts and territories in the colonial period, coupled with Adventist eschatological preaching and emphasis on the Decalogue, contributed to a reputation for theological rigidity in the eyes of some other Christians.

At the same time, numerous examples of cooperation—sharing buildings, joining in development projects, expressing solidarity in times of difficulty, and participating in musical events—show that Adventists appreciate fellowship with other Christians. They are open to social and practical collaboration. Such collaboration enables Adventists and other Christians to live and work while maintaining their unique religious identity and mission.

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NOTES

1. Abraham Reid Youze and Daniel Raphael Mgopa, "Tanzania," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. April 8, 2021, accessed March 11, 2026, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=4FJZ&highlight=Tanzania>.
2. "Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Work," *African Seventh-day Adventist History*, 2018, accessed March 11, 2026, <https://www.africansdahistory.org/tanzania/#:~:text=Development%20of%20Seventh%2Dday%20Adventist,Dominick%2C%20O>.

3. For a summary of Adventist beliefs in relation to other Protestants, see *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016).
4. On German colonial mission policy and comity, see Stefan Hoschele, unpublished historical research on Adventists in Tanzania.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Quoted comments attributed to Kunze and Leipzig missionaries are from Hoschele, Adventist Mission history in Tanzania.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. The author's personal collections, unpublished.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Yusuph Mwita Mageta, interview by author, Bukoba, Tanzania, August 23, 2021.
15. Twakaniki, report on Singida flour mill project, Singida, Tanzania, unpublished.
16. Peter Mumbara, "Report on the Mbagala Violence, October 2012," internal report, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, unpublished.
17. United Republic of Tanzania, President's Office, "End-of-Month Address, 30 March 2013," Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
18. Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tanzania, "Statement on the Butchering of Animals Controversy," internal memorandum, 2013.
19. Pastor Kipangule, interview by author, Nungwi, Zanzibar, Tanzania, July 20, 2021.

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