

# Central Rwanda Field

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## NGABO BIRIKUNZIRA JEROME

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The Central Rwanda Field is located at Muhanga, Muhanga District in the Southern Province of Rwanda. It operates under Rwanda Union Mission in East-Central Africa Division. The administrative office of the Field was moved from Gitwe to Muhanga in 2011. In 2017, the Central Rwanda Field had 250 churches and 119,758 members out of a population of 1,482,250.<sup>1</sup>

The Field has several institutions that include, among others, Gitwe Adventist College, the first church educational institution to be established in Rwanda in 1931 by F. M. Robinson. It started as a seminary but became a college in 1972. In 1976, it was recognized by the government of Rwanda<sup>2</sup>. The school was well-known in the region. Students from D.R. Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda were trained in different areas at the school, and its graduates worked for the Church and the government as well. In recent years, Gahogo Adventist Academy was established at Muhanga. The Field has one Health Center at Gitwe.

## The Organizational History of Central Rwanda Field

The history and organization of Central Rwanda Field began with Gitwe Mission Station, which was founded in the difficult times after World War I by an Adventist Belgian soldier, David Elie Delhove from a small village (Marchienne-Docherie) in the French-speaking region of Wallonia (Belgium). He was born in a peasant Protestant family. After his primary school, he graduated from secondary school at Jumet. Before entering the military service like other young people in his country, he owned a shoe shop in order to earn money to survive<sup>3</sup>.

Delhove came into contact with the Adventist message when he received a box in the mail sent by a relative in Canada containing evangelical tracts printed by Adventists. He studied them, but only learned about the SDA Church much later from Joseph Curdy, an evangelist from Switzerland, who conducted a campaign at Liège. He went to England to study English and attended Stanborough College. He was also a nurse, which he thought would help him to take care of fellow Africans. When he felt ready, he applied for and prayed that God would help him find a place in Africa. After one year, he accepted a call from Central Africa. He was assigned to work with Arthur Asa Carscallen in opening a school at Kamagambo (Kenya).

Delhove was ready to leave when SDA Church leaders in Europe unexpectedly told him that he could not take his family with him due to the harsh living conditions in Africa, so he left alone in 1913. He was not discouraged because he went where he was needed the most and was enthusiastic to begin the work.

After he started the work in Kenya, World War I broke out in August 1914, and Germany invaded Belgium. As a soldier, Delhove was obliged by his country to return home and participate in the war. However, instead of doing so, he decided to write and ask to serve in the African countries because he knew that he would experience more religious liberty in Africa than in his own country. The authorities granted him permission, so he had to abandon his mission for four years. He was therefore involved in war in the region. However, he always wanted to return to his mission as an evangelist. It was while he was involved in the war that he arrived in Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi.<sup>4</sup> This enabled him to know the region where he was going to establish Adventist Mission Stations.

After five years of separation from his family, he was granted a furlough to England where he stayed until his home country was liberated from the German occupation. In great joy, he reached his family in December 1918. While in England, Delhove met Henri Monnier, a young Swiss married to an English lady. He interested them in missionary work, and they agreed to join him as missionaries when he returned to Africa.

In March 1919, the two families left England and reached the estuary of the Congo River five months later. From this place, they traveled by riverboat, railway, truck, and by foot through the vast Congo. Finally, they arrived in Kibuye (Rwanda) on the eastern shore of Lake Kivu on August 4, 1919.<sup>5</sup>

The two missionaries separated. Henri Monnier went to Remera mission station while Elie Delhove took care of Kirinda. These were deserted Protestant mission stations. The two refurbished houses, taught the peasants how to farm more successfully, planted trees around the mission station, and preached the Seventh-day Adventist Church doctrines, which had not been heard before. They introduced the keeping of the Seventh-day Sabbath instead of the first day of the week Sunday, the abstinence from alcoholic beverages, returning tithes, etc. The Protestant Christians of these deserted mission stations were confused by these new teachings which they accepted rather reluctantly.<sup>6</sup>

Delhove and his colleague stayed for twenty months, waiting for final permission to occupy these mission stations permanently. Unfortunately, the District Commissioner informed them that they were required to leave Remera and Kirinda and hand them over to their former proprietors.<sup>7</sup> They were, however, permitted to open their own SDA stations within the country.

## The Founding of Gitwe SDA Mission Station (1921)

Elie Delhove left Kirinda without any known destination, hoping that he would find land for his mission station. According to sources<sup>8</sup>, he traveled to Nyanza in the east, accompanied by people from Kirinda at that time. He was scouting the region when one day he reached a deserted narrow hill between Kirinda and Nyanza. It was said that many years before, Rwandan King Mibambwe I Sekarongoro I Mutabazi (1418-1444) had passed there from Kinyaga (south west Rwanda) when suddenly a storm broke out. He could not find any shelter, so he was enraged and cursed the hill in the name of the spirits of his ancestors. This is why the inhabitants had deserted

the hill.<sup>9</sup>

The name of the hill was Gitwe.<sup>10</sup> People used to bring their dead and throw them there, then hyenas ate them. Hence their skulls remained in the bush. When he heard this story behind the name of the location and saw the strange hill, he was convinced that this was the leading of the Lord and that, in time, the curse would be turned into a blessing. Elie Delhove was not troubled by this story because he knew that the King was not God. He then decided to obtain permission from the authorities to settle there. Because E. Delhove had been asked to leave Kirinda, the authorities finally granted him this land.

On January 30, 1921, he left Kirinda with nine indigenous men who accompanied him to help him build his house and the mission station. After moving his family from Kirinda to Gitwe, he started teaching reading and writing to the people who lived there, showing them how to plant trees, and, of course, teaching them the Word of God. He opened a dispensary and rendered medical assistance to those in need. Patiently he continued to build and preach the Gospel. In 1922, the first baptism of five people took place. These were: L. Miruho, M. Segatwa, D. Nturo, E. Nyambwana, E. Mikayire and L. Delhove.<sup>11</sup> They were the first Rwandan Adventists.

Later in 1931, C.W. Bozarth, who was in charge of East Congo Union (Rwanda, Burundi and Eastern Congo) with the headquarters at Gitwe, together with R. L Jones, realized that they could not continue to preach alone. They then came up with the idea of involving local lay people in evangelism. They established open-air evangelistic crusades called *Amavuna*<sup>12</sup>. Lay people trained by the missionaries conducted these crusades.<sup>13</sup>

In 1934, the first Rwandan pastors were ordained for the ministry: Moses Segatwa, Daniel Kagegera, and Eleazar Semutwa.<sup>14</sup> The *amavuna* method was so successful that, on September 27, 1957, a decision was made by the Union Committee, chaired by Watt, to stop evangelizing for one year because the number of new converts had exceeded their capacity to handle them.<sup>15</sup> This was exceptional in the history of this church. Statistics showed that the number of baptisms was 20,247 in 1958, at the Gitwe mission station alone.<sup>16</sup>

## Central Rwanda Field Superintendents/Directors or Presidents

E. Delhove, 1921-; H. Monnier, 1928; Jones, 1933-1940; Ambs, 1941-1947; B. Wendell, 1947-1953; F. M. Robinson, 1954-1960; Rott, 1961-1965; Short, 1966-1968; W. Bozarth, 1969-1972; S. Sembeba, 1973-1976; Z. Rutwa, 1978-1981; S. Baraburiye, 1998-1990; E. Ntakirutimana, 1991-1992; A. Rugelinyange, 1994-1995; A. Mujyarugamba, 1996-1998; E. Kayonga, 1999-2000; J. Rusine, 2001-2005; E. Munyakarama, 2006-2011; S. Ngirinshuti, 2011-2015; A. Ngarambe, 2015-2016; A. Uwumuremyi Jolay, 2016- .

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### SOURCES

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*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976.

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Rwanda Government Ministerial Decision No 7/7 of August 10, 1976. Central Rwanda Field records, Gitarama, Rwanda.

M. Segatwa *Huguka Ibihe Bih'ibindi* No 1. Kenilworth, Cape, RSA. Sentinel Publishing Company, 1958.

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## NOTES

1. "Central Rwanda Fiel," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 2018, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/2018.pdf>. Page 43.
2. Rwanda Government Ministerial Decision No 7/7 of August 10, 1976.
3. L. Delhove *A Daughter Remembers* (Denver, U.S.A., Master Printers, 1984). 8.
4. The three countries were under Belgian rule.
5. Delhove *A Daughter Remembers*.
6. M. Segatwa, *Huguka Ibihe Biha Ibindi* No 1. (Kenilworth, Cape, R.S.A., Sentinel Publishing Company, Kenilworth, 1958).
7. *Anet* (1921:2), the Secretary General of the "Societe Belge des Missions Protestantes au Congo" reported that the authorities of Rwanda, while respecting E. Delhove much, hesitated to allow him the extension of the Adventist Mission. They suspected the Adventists were connected to the Panafricanism Movement, although they couldn't prove it.
8. Gasana Justin, Pastor who worked with the Pioneers.
9. At that time, people believed that the King was like God and what he said was taken as divine.
10. *Gitwe* means skull in Kinyarwanda, the local language.
11. Segatwa, *Huguka Ibihe biha ibindi* No 1, (1958), 3.
12. Kinyarwanda word for "Evangelistic Efforts."
13. M. Segatwa (1958), 3.
14. Information provided by Mukeruru Zacheus, a retired SDA pastor, March 17, 2005.
15. Congo Union Mission Minutes, action 450/57 on November 27, 1957.

16. M. Segatwa *Huguka Ibihe Biha Ibindi*, No 1 (1958), 3.

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