



Kenya Lake Conference headquarters.

Photo courtesy of West Kenya Union Conference.

# Kenya Lake Conference

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## CLIFFORD OTIENO MAKEMO, AND GODFREY K. SANG

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Kenya Lake Conference (KLF) is part of West Kenya Union Conference in the East-Central Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Its headquarters is located in Kendu Bay, Kenya.

Territory: Rangwe Division of Homa Bay District; Muksero sub-location of Kisii District; Bukiria location of Nyamira District; Rachuonyo District; and Mfangano, Central, and Mbita divisions of Suba District.

Statistics (June 30, 2020): Churches, 647; membership, 91,444; population, 2,147,785.<sup>1</sup>

## Historical Background

In November 1906, Arthur Carscallen arrived at Kendu Bay on the southern shores of Lake Victoria together with Peter Nyambo from Nyasaland (now Malawi), becoming the first missionaries in British East Africa. The two gentlemen were hosted by Mzee Osumba Simba, a clan elder. Osumba gave them a piece of land where they pitched their tents. One evening as they were walking around, they went to Ogango Hills and said, "This is where God wants to build his Sanctuary."<sup>2</sup> They named it Gendia. Chief Orinda, the colonial leader, together with Mzee Ongo Onyango, offered them that hill for God's work.

The first people who responded to the Gospel work through baptism were Isaac Okeyo and Paul Mboya among others.<sup>3</sup> They became important evangelists, and the Gospel work continues to this day. From the early days, evangelism, education, the medical work and publishing have been the primary methods of spreading the Gospel.

## Kenya Lake: From Mission Field to Conference

In the three years from 1950 to 1953, the tremendous growth of the Adventist Church in Kenya necessitated the re-organization of the Kenya Mission Field. Between June 1950 to September 1952, some 9,531 baptisms had taken place, and by June 1953, the membership of the Kenya Mission Field had risen to 34,329.<sup>4</sup> R. S. Watts, the president of the Southern Africa Division, through the East Africa Union Committee, recommended that the Kenya Mission Field, which administered the whole of Kenya, be split to create three new Mission Fields in Kenya. These were – the Kenya Lake Mission Field to be based in Gendia, South Kenya Mission Field to be based in Nyanchwa, Kisii, and Central Kenya Mission Field to be based at Karura, Nairobi.<sup>5</sup> The other fields within EAU were the Tanganyika Mission Field and the Uganda Mission Field.

In June 1953, the Kenya Lake Mission Field was organized with Danish missionary Frithjof H. Muderspach becoming the interim president. R. A. Carey, the long-term press manager, became the interim secretary treasurer.<sup>6</sup> Both Muderspach and Carey were also departmental leaders, with Muderspach being the Home Missionary department leader and Carey the Sabbath School secretary. By this time, the tithes at the Kenya Lake Mission Field were only able to pay 51 percent of the Field's wages.<sup>7</sup> This called for greater effort in mobilizing sufficient funding for self-sustenance. The African per capita tithing in 1953 stood at Sh. 10.67, a drop from Sh. 11.16 in 1952.<sup>8</sup> The tithing for 1954 would only rise marginally to Sh. 11.29.<sup>9</sup> Virtually all the new fields were in varying degrees of self-sufficiency, with none of them able to cover 100 percent of their needs. This meant more

actions were required to improve the situation. One of these was greater financial education of members and their need to support the Church.<sup>10</sup> The per capita giving at KLF was lower than that of the Central Kenya Field, which was nearly twice the Union-wide average.<sup>11</sup>

By 1953, the KLF had the largest number of churches within the East Africa Union. KLF had 82 churches or 44 percent of the 185 churches of the EAU, which also included Tanganyika and Uganda.<sup>12</sup> It also had the highest number of members – 13,434 of the 35,240 members of the EAU or 38 percent of all the Field's members.<sup>13</sup> The following year, 1954, those numbers had risen to 14,451 or 37.4 percent of the 38,608 members of the Church. It also had the highest number of churches (91), which represented 37 percent of the 221 churches of the EAU. Although there was an increase in membership and the number of churches, the other regions were growing as well, apparently slowing the relative growth of KLF.

In 1954, F. E. Schlehuber took over from Frithjof Muderspach, who was called to Tanganyika.<sup>14</sup> Carey remained in the same position. Prior to this, Schlehuber was in charge of the Ranen Mission, which was part of the KLF. The other mission stations under the KLF were Gendia and Maliera in Yala.<sup>15</sup> In 1956, H. W. Stevenson took over the leadership of the Kenya Lake Field and E. G. Olsen took over from Carey as Secretary-Treasurer.<sup>16</sup> Before coming to Gendia, Stevenson was the president of the Malamulo Mission in Nyasaland. E. G. Olsen was head of the Katikamu Mission in Bombo Uganda.<sup>17</sup>

KLF membership continued to climb and was consistently leading in terms of membership. During the end-year meeting of the Southern Africa Division in 1959, incoming President Robert H. Pierson stated that a recommendation had been adopted to split the Kenya Lake Field by elevating the Ranen Mission to its own Field in 1961.<sup>18</sup> By 1959, there was concern that, while indeed the KLF was leading in numbers (now consistently above 31 percent of all membership), the giving was comparatively lower. While Tanganyika Mission Field accounted for 27 percent of all the membership in the EAU, it accounted for only 35 percent of all giving compared to KLF's 18 percent.<sup>19</sup>

In 1961, the Kenya Lake Field was indeed split, and this resulted in the creation of the Ranen Field. Pastor Christopher Odero became the inaugural president, the first African to lead a Field. The Kenya Lake Field also received an African as their vice president. This was Pastor Daniel Odulo.<sup>20</sup> The process of Africanization had already begun with Andrew Gathemia becoming the vice president of the Central Kenya Field and Abraham Oirere becoming the vice president of the South Kenya Field.<sup>21</sup> Stevenson remained as president of KLF. In 1962, F. E. Wilson took over the presidency of the KLF. Olsen also left, and L. D. Browne became president. Odula remained as vice president.<sup>22</sup>

In 1964, Z. Sang'ori became the new secretary-treasurer while Wilson remained president.<sup>23</sup> In 1969, Z. S. Amayo replaced Sang'ori as the secretary-treasurer. Again, Wilson remained.<sup>24</sup> Wilson left in 1970, and during that year, the seat remained vacant while a suitable replacement was being found. In 1971, S. O. Omulo took over from Wilson, becoming the first African to head the organization.<sup>25</sup> By this time, the membership had reached 18,962

spread out in 99 churches. In 1975, E. G. Oloo took over from Amayo. Membership shot up sharply to 23,860 in 118 churches – an increase of 19 new churches in one calendar year.<sup>26</sup> In 1981, Pr. Joseph Okello took over from Omulo and E. G. Oloo remained,<sup>27</sup> but then left the following year, 1982, and was replaced by Zablon Asiyu. By this time, membership stood at 35,577 in 188 churches.<sup>28</sup> During 1982, the worldwide Church started an important evangelistic program called the “1000 Days of Reaping,” a series of mass crusades and baptisms that commenced on September 18, 1982, and ended on June 15, 1985. In 1983, KLF membership rose to 40,951 in 219 churches.<sup>29</sup> In the following year, 1984, it climbed to 43,273 in 234 churches. By the end of that campaign, the Field’s membership had risen to 47,905 with an additional four churches (a total of 238). Both Okello and Asiyu continued to remain in charge.

In 1989, Elijah Dulo took over from Okello and Harrison K. Katuku assumed the role of secretary-treasurer from Asiyu. By this time, there were 272 churches with a membership of 64,372.<sup>30</sup> In 1990, the KLF was split to create the Central Nyanza Field, which covered portions of Kisumu and Siaya counties.<sup>31</sup> In 1991, Harrison K. Kitsao became the new secretary-treasurer, replacing Katuku.<sup>32</sup> By this time, the membership had suffered two consecutive seasons of regression, then standing at 59,244 in 210 churches. Dulo remained in charge.<sup>33</sup> The drop in numbers was largely due to territorial realignment with some churches being passed on to the newly created North Nyanza Field.

In 1992, Elijah D. Magak became president and Samuel M. Bolo replaced Kitsao as secretary-treasurer. In 1995, Wilson Ajuoga took over from Magak while Bolo remained.<sup>34</sup> In 1996, Bolo was replaced by Cosmas O. Nyabola. Membership was now 74,405 in 266 churches. In 1999, George Okeyo was made president and Calvin Okoth became secretary-treasurer.<sup>35</sup> In 2002, Harrison N. Ogot took over from Okeyo while Okoth remained. Membership at this time stood at 107,329 in 355 churches. In 2003, Tom E. A. Ogal replaced Calvin Okoth as secretary. The position of treasurer went to Sospeter Ong’idi.<sup>36</sup> In 2006, Duncan Mumbo followed Ogot as president.<sup>37</sup> Mumbo remained until 2009 when he handed the reigns over to Lewis Ondiek. Ogal also left, and in his place came Tobias Okeyo Panyako. There were now 502 churches with a membership of 71,900.<sup>38</sup>

In 2010, the Kenya Lake Field became the Kenya Lake Conference. Lewis Ondiek was the last president of the KLF. It would take another two years before the new leader would be found. In 2014, Tobias Panyako became president with Tom Eli Arunga Ogal returning to his previous position as secretary. Kilion Agalo became treasurer.<sup>39</sup> In 2016, George Okeyo replaced Panyako as president while Benson Ogayo became secretary and Nicodemus Oyugi was named treasurer. By 2020, the president was Benson O. Ogayo while Clifford O. Makemo was the secretary while Oyugi remained as treasurer.<sup>40</sup>

## Challenges

In 1961, Kenya Lake was divided into two organizations, namely Kenya Lake Field and Ranen Field. This hampered the growth of Kenya Lake which could not attain conference status sooner than anticipated. The

remaining territory was stabilizing by 1989 when again it was ready for conference status. The North Nyanza Field, currently known as Central Nyanza, was created in 1990 out of Kenya Lake Field. Again, this slowed down the growth within the territory.<sup>41</sup>

There was also the presence of a large diaspora of migrants outside the KLF territory who left to pioneer previously unentered areas. These included people like Pastor Luke Amayo, who went to western Tanzania around the Lake Victoria region, and Jakobo Olwa, who went to Nyanchwa to evangelize the Gussi people among others. This trend continued, with Kenya Lake members spread all over the country for the purposes of employment as well as evangelism. This affected the growth, causing a delay in attaining conference status.<sup>42</sup>

In 2010, Kenya Lake Field was organized as a conference during a session at Nyabola Girls Secondary School. During this ceremony, which was chaired by Pastor Blacious Ruguri, who was then president of East-Central Africa Division, together with Dan Agwena, the field become a conference. These were among the committee members who worked hard for the transition of Kenya Lake to a Conference. The inauguration of the new conference was held on September 15-17, 2010, and the leaders were then elected for the conference.

## Kenya Lake Conference Presidents

Lewis Ondiek (2010-2011); Tobias Panyako (2012-2015); George Okeyo (2016-2018); Benson Ogayo (2019-)

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"Southern African Division Statement of Tithe and Mission Offerings ..." *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, September 15, 1960.

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### NOTES

1. "Kenya Lake Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2021).
2. Kenya Lake Conference booklet, Kenya Lake Conference archives, Kendu Bay, Kenya.
3. Late Polycarp Okeyo was a pastor at Kenya Lake Field. He was the son of the late Isaac Okeyo, one of the pioneers of the Adventist message at Gendia region. Polycarp was interviewed before his death.
4. G. A. Otter, "Report of Work in Mombera Section," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, February 1, 1952, 4.
5. Ibid.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1954), 184.
7. E. D. Hanson, "Constituency Meetings in East Africa," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, November 15, 1953, 4.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. E. D. Hanson, "Report of the East African Union Mission," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, February 15, 1956, 29.
12. "Statement of Tithe and Membership," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, July 1, 1953, 4.
13. Ibid.
14. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1955), 153.
15. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1954), 184.
16. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1958), 160.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1956), 402.
18. Robert H. Pierson, "Administrative Changes in the Southern African Division," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, March 15, 1960, 1.
19. "Southern African Division Statement of Tithe and Mission Offerings...," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, September 15, 1960, 6.
20. "New Appointments," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, March 15, 1961, 10.



21. Ibid.
22. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1962), 201.
23. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1964), 255.
24. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1970), 290.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1972), 94.
26. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1976), 106.
27. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1982), 81.
28. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1983), 89.
29. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1984), 84.
30. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1990), 63.
31. Ibid.
32. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1999), 61.
33. Ibid.
34. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1996), 105.
35. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2001), 70.
36. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2004), 40.
37. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2007), 42.
38. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2010), 42.
39. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2015), 71.
40. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2020), 67.

41. Pastor George Okeyo, interview with authors. Okeyo served in Kenya Lake during both its time as a field as well as conference said that Kenya Lake was due for conference status as early as 1960s. However, whenever it would be ready to be organized, there would come a sub-division into another territory.

42. Retired Pastor Polycarp Okeyo (Adwen) said that the members of Kenya Lake Field concentrated in evangelizing the other territories to the extent that they forgot to keep track of their own backyards.

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