

The Adventist Youth Movement in Kenya

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Samuel Makori is a retired pastor who worked closely with the Adventist Youth Movement in Kenya.

The Adventist Youth Organization (AYO) started in the Kisiiland of Western Kenya in the late 1960s. It made a huge impact on the Adventist church in Kenya. AYO started in the late 1960s and continued until 2001! Its impact is seen in the areas of preaching, church leadership, church planting, and providing the pastoral ministry with personnel.

Background

The Adventist Church spread to Kisiiland in 1912 from Gendia, by Jacob Olwa under the supervision of the white missionaries Ira Evanson, Lenard Lane, and Eric Beavon.² Church leadership did not give priority to young people. Interviews from those who founded or offered leadership in the AYO movement—Thomas Onchaga (retired pastor), Johua Oindi (retired pastor), Shadrack Nyamwaro (retired teacher),³ and James Obwogi (retired teacher)—show that youth activities were limited to the Missionary Volunteer honors and singing during Sabbath School. The young people did not take church seriously. If a young person attended high school, he/she left the church and frequently developed an attitude that Adventism was only for the illiterate.⁴

The mainstream youth department, the Missionary Volunteer program, started in 1912 to take care of the young people in the Adventist Church.⁵ It did not provide the requisite environment for establishing the Kisii youth in the faith and creating interest in church life and mission. The AYO was started to fill this gap and to create an atmosphere in which the youth would commit themselves completely to a spiritual life.

Establishment of the AYO in Kisiiland

The four individuals interviewed to provide information for this article remember very well that this movement started on a Sabbath day, August 5, 1966. This was the end of a series of sermons preached by Pastor Jack Sequeira, then a teacher at Kamagambo Adventist College. They recall that on this closing day he preached from Philippians 3:12-14 and the topic was, "Pressing on Towards the Goal." This created a passion in some young people who decided to do something for their fellow youth.

That evening, eight young people, Thomas Onchaga, James Onyancha, Stanley Nyachieng'a, Elijah Osoro, David Orina, Shadrach Nyamwaro, and James Maronga, decided to stay at the home of a man named Nyapolo

overnight to review the sermons given by Pastor Sequeira during the camp meeting. They also discussed the spiritual condition of the youth. They decided to start a study group to attract the youth. They chose to study the book, *Messages to Young People*, by Ellen G. White. They met a number of times at this home before moving to a church setting.

Spread of the AYO

From this small beginnings in Nyapolo's home, this movement spread to the Bosiango SDA Church where they met for a number of months. According to Pastor Thomas Ochaga (now 77), young people from the three districts of Motagara, Makairo, and Nyachogochogo, met regularly for Bible study and prayer. When the group grew larger, they moved to the Nyakeore SDA Church and used it for some time. As the numbers grew and distances increased, they moved the meeting place to the Kebirigo Church, which was located at the mission station center for the entire west and north Mogirango. Later they created other centers around the Nyaikuro area and, later yet, to Tonga and Nyagesenda.

During the period from 1970 to 1975, the movement spread all over the seven locations of Gusiiland—South Mugirango, Wanjare, Bomachoge, Bobasi, Nyaribari, Kitutu, and West/North Mogirango. This was also the time AYO was recognized by the South Kenya Field. Elders Oindi, Nyamwaro, and Obwogi remember and appreciate the pastoral assistance they received from the gospel ministers in general, but more especially from Pastors H. Moronya, Charles Abere, Stanley Nyachio, and Peter Chief Mairura. The later part of the 1970s through the 1990s, the movement enjoyed recognition and involvement by thousands of young people in the life and mission of the church. The presence of this movement and its activities led in part to the change of status of the South Kenya Field to a conference in 1981 and later the reorganization of the conference into two separate conferences—the South Kenya Conference and the Nyamira Conference in 1995⁶

AYO Activities

The youth in this organization carried out a number of activities. Nehemiah Nyaundi identifies six major activities:

1. Public Evangelistic Efforts. These were public evangelistic series conducted annually in the month of December. Service requests were generated from the local churches and acted upon by the AYO Central Committee.
2. Youth Rallies. These were conducted in the month of April during school holidays and were for the nurture of the youth. After a weeklong seminar, the youth were put in groups and sent throughout the South Kenya Field to teach other young people who did not have opportunity to attend the Bible Conference.

3. Revival meetings. These were for the purpose of reclamation of backsliders and those whose spiritual fervor wavered. They were conducted whenever requested.
4. Youth Seminars. These were held throughout the year on Saturdays and Sundays, especially at district or station levels.
5. Bible Study groups. Various Bible Study groups were formed throughout the field, and later the conference, and youth enlisted in whichever group they chose.
6. Youth Tours. These were short or long tours the youth made from everywhere to everywhere for purposes of visiting one another or for studying the Bible.⁷

The Impact of AYO

Participation in these activities made an impact on the youth and their involvement in the life and mission of the church that is now remembered with nostalgia in Gusiland.

First, the movement attracted the youth to church and made them members who committed themselves to serve the church in all capacities.

Second, the youth took Adventism to the high schools, colleges, and universities where they were studying. This was the beginning of Adventist groups which have now transitioned into churches in every university in Kenya and even abroad where they went to study and work.

Third, the AYO provided able speakers who served during seminars and camp meetings.

Fourth, the AYO trained young people to take up leadership roles in the Church. Local churches never lacked for well-trained and committed elders, deacons/deaconesses, and those who served in various departments. Most young people who passed through AYO trained and served the church as pastors.

Fifth, church weddings became a common feature for starting families. It was more or less ingrained in the youth that the only way to start a family was through a church wedding. There was the resultant commitment to raising strong families based on Adventist values.

A final impact credited to the AYO movement was in the area of stewardship. The young people emphasized faithfulness in returning tithe and giving offerings. Field income increased steadily from either employment or proceeds from businesses, so that by 1981 the South Kenya Field was elevated to conference status.⁸ It kept growing until it was reorganized into two administrative units, South Kenya Conference and Nyamira Conference.

AYO Leadership

The AYO was organized from the local church to the conference level. The leadership was simple and consisted of the chairman (president), secretary, and treasurer.

Chairmen: David Orina (1966-1975), Enoch Sagana (1995-1984), James Obwogi (1984- 2001).

Secretaries: Thomas Onchaga (1966-1970), Joshua Oindi (1970-1990), Henry Marigi (1990-1995), Naftal Moturi (1996-2001).

Treasurers: Stanley Nyachienga (1966-1971), Silvanus Moturi (1972-1995), Edward Atan'ga (1995-2001).

Current Status of AYO

The AYO movement that became a conference wide movement in the 1970s, continued in that state until 1995, when South Kenya Conference was reorganized into two administrative entities, the South Kenya Conference and the Nyamira Conference. AYO was run separately in the two conferences, but was challenged along the way. In South Kenya Conference, it was abolished in 2001 by the president and the executive committee. According to James Obwogi, the administration felt that the movement was overshadowing the mainstream youth ministry and the lay members were holding more power than the pastors in the field. AYO was then aligned with the youth ministry and the elected youth leader of the conference was asked to take care of and take full control of all the youth activities.⁹

The movement in Nyamira continued in its original arrangement beyond 2001, but it also took the path taken by the South Kenya Conference in 2005, probably for the same reasons, but presented more diplomatically. Currently the AYO activities are run by the conference youth department in both conferences but on a smaller scale than in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰

SOURCES

Nyaundi, Nehemiah M. *Seventh-day Adventism in Gusii, Kenya*. Kendu Bay, Kenya: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1997.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. Washington D.C. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976.

NOTES

1. James Obwogi, interview with the author at Lavington Estate, Nairobi, Kenya. Elder Obwogi is a retired pastor.

2. Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, *Seventh-day Adventism in Gusii, Kenya* (Kendu Bay, Kenya: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1997), 27.
3. Shadrach Nyamwaro, interview with the author, Kisii, Kenya, February 12, 2020. Elder Nyamwaro is a retired teacher.
4. Thomas Onchaga, interview with the author, Kisii, Kenya, February 12, 2020. Elder Onchaga is a retired pastor.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1976), 1627.
6. Joshua Oindi, interview with the author, Nyamira town, Kisii, Kenya, February 13, 2020.
7. Nyaundi, 190-199.
8. Thomas Onchaga, interview with the author, Kisii, Kenya, February 12, 2020.
9. Personal knowledge of the author as a front line pastor working closely with AYO.
10. Ibid.

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