

Rwanda

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Rwanda is a republic in east-central Africa. It is one of the countries that comprise the East-Central Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

With an area of 26,338 square kilometers (10,169 square miles), and an estimated population of 12,187,400 in 2018, Rwanda is the most populated country in Africa with a population density of 485 people per square kilometer.¹

In 2017 there were 854,958 Seventh-day Adventist Church members in Rwanda, meaning that there were about 698 Adventists per 10,000 population. There were 1,844 Adventist churches, 691 companies, and 193 ordained ministers.² The SDA Church in Rwanda is governed by Rwanda Union Mission which is part of the East-Central Africa Division.³

Overview

Located a few degrees south of the Equator, Rwanda is bordered by Uganda in the north, Tanzania in the east, Burundi in the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the west. Rwanda is in the African Great Lakes region and is highly elevated; its geography is dominated by mountains in the west and savanna to the east, with numerous lakes throughout the country. The country is often given the title “Land of a Thousand Hills,” because of its fertile and hilly terrain. With an average altitude of 1,600 meters above sea level, the country enjoys a temperate and subtropical climate, with two rainy seasons and two dry seasons each year. The population is young and predominantly rural.⁴

Rwanda has three official languages: Kinyarwanda, French, and English. Kiswahili has been used in commercial centers and on the national broadcast radio.

Unlike much of Africa, the future of Rwanda was not decided by the 1884 [Berlin Conference](#). Rather, the region was divided in an 1890 conference in Brussels. This gave Rwanda and [Burundi](#) to the [German Empire](#). The Germans did not significantly alter the social structure of the country, but exerted influence by supporting the king and the existing hierarchy and delegating power to local chiefs. Belgian forces took control of Rwanda and Burundi during World War I, beginning a period of more direct colonial rule. Belgium simplified and centralized the power structure and introduced large-scale projects in education, health, public works, and agricultural

supervision, including new crops and improved agricultural techniques to try to reduce the frequency of famine.

⁵ Rwanda ceded to Belgium after World War I and remained part of the Belgian-administered trust territory of Ruanda-Urundi until July 1962, when it became independent.⁶

In more recent times, the questions relating to the three groups (Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa) have gained international attention, especially during and after the civil war and genocide in the 1990s. Within Rwanda, a period of reconciliation and justice began with the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the reintroduction of *Gacaca*, a traditional village court system. Since 2000 Rwanda's economy, tourist numbers, and Human Development Index have grown steadily. Between 2006 and 2011 the poverty rate reduced from 57 percent to 45 percent, while life expectancy rose from 46.6 years in 2000 to 59.7 years in 2015.⁷

According to the 2012 census, Roman Catholics represented 43.7 percent of the population, Protestants 37.7 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 11.8 percent, and Muslims 2 percent; .2 percent claimed no religious beliefs, and 1.3 percent did not state a religion. Traditional religion, despite officially being followed by only .1 percent of the population, retains an influence. Many Rwandans view the Christian God as synonymous with the traditional Rwandan god, *Imana*.⁸

Arrival of Seventh-day Adventists and Growth of the Church

David Elie Delhove (1882-1949), a young pioneer worker from Belgium, began the SDA work in Rwanda shortly after World War I. At the outbreak of the war in 1914, Delhove, serving with the British Union missions in British East Africa, was drafted into the Belgian Army. He served during the war years doing clerical work with the Belgian forces in that portion of East German East Africa that later became the Belgian mandated territories of Ruanda-Urundi. Impressed by the beauty of the country and the intelligence of its African inhabitants, he became convinced that this would be a fruitful field for SDA mission endeavor. At his suggestion, he and his family and another young man, Henri Monnier, were appointed missionaries to this new territory. For a time Delhove took charge of some Protestant mission stations that had been abandoned during the war. When the Protestant missionaries returned, Delhove looked for a site on which to erect his own station. He was given a 125-acre plot, 11 miles north of the town of Nyanza on a low ridge known as the Hill of Skulls, a spot the natives allegedly believed had once been cursed by the Rwandan king. Here the foundations were laid for Gitwe Mission. Being on an elevation of 5,643 feet above sea level, the climate is healthful.⁹

In 1920 Henri Monnier of Switzerland opened the Buganza Mission near Lake Muhazi. When the Great North Road was laid through the mission site, a new site was found near Ruhengeri at an elevation of 7,643 feet above sea level to which, in April 1921, Monnier and Matter moved the mission. While on furlough Matter took a course in tropical medicine. Upon his return in April 1943, he and his sister, Maria Matter, started the Rwankeri dispensary where Mrs. A. Matter served as midwife.¹⁰

The first baptism here took place in 1924 with two candidates: Yohana Ruvugihomvu and Petero Rukangarajunga. In 1925 the first woman, Maria Nyirabigwagwa, was baptized. A school was opened in 1925 headed by Henri Monnier, with the following teachers: Yohana Ruvugihomvu, Paulo Rwangezeho, Petero Rukangarajunga, Gideon Gakindi, and Filipo Kurugibwami. This same year four outlying schools were organized: Rubaka, Kaziba, Hesha, and Bihinga. These were taught by Africans who had learned reading, writing, and arithmetic while working for Monnier. Of these teachers, Yohana and Paulo were ordained as ministers in 1934.¹¹

Monnier remained at Rwankeri from 1921 to 1940. This long stay and his thorough acquaintance with the people and their language qualified him to translate large portions of the Bible into Kinyarwanda, which were accepted by the British and Foreign Bible Society and have been incorporated into the present Kinyarwanda Bible. He also wrote a popular Kinyarwanda grammar for English-speaking missionaries.¹²

Central African Union

In 1960, because of the SDA membership growth in the region, it was time to establish a Rwanda-Burundi union. In 1961 these two countries were removed from the Congo Union and were given their own union, the Central African Union, with its headquarters in Bujumbura (Burundi). Vail was appointed president. In the same year, in Rwanda, three fields were born: South Rwanda Field based in Gitwe and led by E. Schultz, North Rwanda Field in Rwankeri, led by H. Kotz, and West Rwanda Field in Ngoma, led by J. G. Mattingly.¹³

Kigali Field

South Rwanda Field in Gitwe continued to expand towards the eastern part of the country. The mission work reached Kigali, Byumba, and Kibungo within the Umutara region. To visit these remote areas from Gitwe was not easy since there were no transportation facilities. Students were sent from Gitwe to evangelize these new areas. Pastor Z. Rutwa came several times for evangelism outreach in Kigali. In 1965, Kigali Field was inaugurated and was led by Pastor Baraburiye. Nyamirambo became the headquarters.

South Rwanda Field

Gitwe Field continued to expand. After Kigali, it spread to the southern part of the country and the gospel reached Butare and Gikongoro. By the year 1970, the idea of splitting the field arose because it was so big. In a meeting held in Blantyre, Malawi, on November 17, 1970, an action was taken to split the field. Thus, two fields were born: South Rwanda Field, based in Butare and headed by S. Sebujiho; and Central Rwanda Field based in Gitwe and headed by A. K. Phillips, with his deputy president, Pastor Rutwa.¹⁴

West Rwanda Field

The work began in Ngoma Mission early in the 1930s. At first the mission work was under the East African Union. Like other mission fields, Ngoma continued to expand. A. Matter led it until he returned home in 1945. The SDA ministry spread to Cyangugu, a neighboring region of Kibuye. The church in this area was known mainly because of its health ministry. The Ngoma (Mugonero) Hospital is well known because many people are treated there.

Mission leaders worked here as follows:

B. R. Bickley (1946-1949)

C. E. Felton (1950-1951)

W. H. Johnson (1951-1953)

J. G. Mattingly (1954-1960)

E. Semugeshi (1961-1963) (1977-1980)

M. Sembage (1964-1966)

E. Ntakirutimana (1967-1970) (1980-1984)

S. Nzarora (1971-1977)

In 1954 the field consisted of Kibuye, Cyangungu, plus one commune of Kayove (Gisenyi) and Muko (Gikongoro). That is when the name Ngoma Mission was changed into Mugonero. It is reported that the change was triggered by the confusion resulting from Ngoma (of Kibuye) and Goma (of Congo), because goods intended for Ngoma would go to Goma and vice versa.¹⁵

In 1961 things changed. Pastor E. Semugeshi led the field as the first Rwandan national until 1963, at which time he fled to Tanzania like other Tutsis, following the political turmoil inside the country. He was replaced by M. Sembagare in 1964, who occupied that position until 1966. The following year E. Ntakirutimana was elected field president and worked until 1970, at which time he was assigned the position of a departmental director in the Central Africa Union in Bujumbura. He was replaced by S. Nzarora. In 1977, E. Semugeshi returned from exile and led the field until 1980, when he was replaced by E. Ntakirutimana until 1984. By that time the field was united with Rwankeri. Then Cyangugu was annexed to the field of Butare in the south of the country. From 1993, when it was observed that the North Rwanda Field was too big to be managed, it was necessary to restore Mugonero Field. Pastor E. Ntakirutimana led the field again until the genocide against Tutsis in April 1994.¹⁶

Rwanda Union Mission

In 1984 the church in Rwanda grew tremendously with 142,381 church members. It was time for Rwanda to have its own union: Rwanda Union Mission. R. G. Peck was the first president, N. Musaza, the executive secretary, and S. Mbangukira, the treasurer. The union was composed of three fields: East Rwanda Field, North Rwanda Field, and South Rwanda Field. In 1989, R. G. Peck was replaced by Leitao who left Rwanda in 1994,

following the Genocide of Tutsis which took the lives of more than one million people, including Adventist church members, pastors, and other workers. In 1995, A. Rugelinyange was elected the first Rwandan Union Mission president, E. Mbuguje, the executive secretary, and S. Bimenyimana, the treasurer. In 2005, H. Byilingiro was elected president. The number of fields increased from three to five: East Rwanda Field, Central Rwanda Field, West Rwanda Field, South Rwanda Field, and North Rwanda Field. In 2011 two fields were restructured; the East Rwanda Field was divided into two. It became East Central Rwanda Field, while the newly born field was named East Rwanda Field. The North Rwanda Field gave birth to the North West Rwanda Field. In 2015 two fields became conferences: The East Central Rwanda Field (now East Central Rwanda Conference), and the North Rwanda Conference.¹⁷

Total Member Involvement

In May 2016, there was a special evangelism outreach in Rwanda, “Total Member Involvement” (TMI) led by General Conference president, Pastor Ted Wilson, with other evangelists from America, Europe, and Africa. SDA members from Rwanda played a very important role in that evangelism. On completion of the outreach more than 110,000 people were baptized. To provide care to new members and facilitate the large increase in membership, 54 pastors were ordained after a seminar which took place in Nyamata on June 3, 2017. Church members built their own church buildings and fields supported them.

Church Administrative Units and Institutions

The growth of the church has resulted in the creation of eight local church administrative units which form the Rwanda Union Mission (1984); [Central Rwanda Field](#) (1921), East Central Rwanda Conference (1965), North Rwanda Conference (1922); North-East Rwanda Field (2016), North-West Rwanda Field (2016), South Rwanda Field (1970), South-East Rwanda Field (2017), and West Rwanda Field (1931).¹⁸

The work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been supported by the contribution of the educational institutions which include the [Adventist University of Central Africa](#), Gitwe Adventist Secondary School, Rwankeri Adventist Secondary School, Gisenyi Adventist Secondary School, Nyakarambi Technical and Vocational School, Karengye Technical and Vocational School, Gakoni Adventist Secondary School, and Gahogo Adventist Academy.

Medical institutions have made an appreciated contribution to the growth of the work. They include Kigali Adventist Dental Clinic, Karora Adventist Health Centre, Kigali Adventist Medical Centre, Kinunu Adventist Health Centre, Mugonero Hospital, Nyarurama Adventist Health Centre, Rwankeri Health Centre, Gitwe Adventist Health Centre, Mugonero Adventist Health Centre, and [Nyarwungo Adventist Health Center](#).

Other entities which have supported the work of the church include ADRA, Literature Ministry Seminary (LMS), Gakoni Orphanage, and Voice of Hope Radio.

The SDA Church and the Community

Though a comparatively small country, Rwanda contains the largest concentration of SDA membership in the world. Annual camp meetings as well as evangelistic campaigns of lay evangelists have played an important part in bringing the people together. The laity also owns a number of schools, from kindergarten to tertiary level, planted throughout the country, thus participating in evangelism.¹⁹

On October 2017, Minister Harelimana Cyriaque, the Minister of State in charge of socio-economic development in the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), commended the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rwanda for contributing significantly to the development of the country. He highlighted this in Kicukiro district, where thousands of Adventist church members in the city of Kigali were gathered for community work.²⁰

The SDA work in Rwanda has grown tremendously but is not without challenges. The SDA church in Rwanda faces challenges in the area of education with the increased need for qualified teachers, and health ministry to develop and maintain new health programs such as family planning and prevention of drug addiction and use of alcoholic beverages. More district church pastors need to be trained and funds are needed to build new churches due to membership increases from new baptisms.

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