

Johansen, Svein B.

(1930–1997)

SVEN HAGEN JENSEN

Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

Svein Karl Birger Johansen was a Norwegian missionary to Scandinavia, West Africa, and the Middle East for almost 40 years.

Early Years and Education

Svein Karl Birger Johansen was born on June 12, 1930, in Troms, Norway, to Henry Johansen and Gudrun Larsen. He grew up in Ramfjord, Tromsø, Norway, where his mother was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He attended a public elementary school and completed the last two years of elementary education in the school overseen by the local Adventist church. At the age of 16 he went to Onsrud Mission School for his Realskole (tenth grade). In 1949 he did summer evangelism in northern Norway, the only time he worked for the Adventist church in his home country, Norway. On June 11, 1952, he married Anna Sigfusdottir from Iceland. They had three children: Per, Mark, and Linda. Johansen earned his B.A. at Emmanuel Missionary College, U.S.A., in 1954, completed his M.A. at Potomac University in 1955, and his M.Div. from Andrews University in 1957. In the summers he earned his school fees by canvassing and by doing building and construction work.^{1 2}

The Iceland Years

In 1958 Johansen received a call to Iceland to work as a pastor-evangelist. From 1959-1965 he was the Iceland Conference departmental director for lay activities, Sabbath school, and youth.³ He was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister in 1960.⁴ In an article in the *Review and Herald* in 1960 he describes the progress of the



Svein B. Johansen.

Photo courtesy of the Historic Archive of Seventh-day Adventists (HASDA).

work on the volcanic Westman Island, about a 12-hour boat ride from the capital, Reykjavik, and with the second largest Adventist church in the conference. The church had 65 members and 35 youth and children in a fishing town of only 4,500. The Sabbath school had become the church's chief source and spiritual strength, and the youth work prospered. "No other service is so well attended as the Sabbath school", and "out of the children's Sabbath school has grown a well-attended Sunday school for the children of the city. Every Sunday, about 150 children filled the church."⁵

After a three-year term in Liberia, West Africa, as a mission president,⁶ Johansen was called back to Iceland to be the president of the conference.⁷ This responsibility he carried from 1968-1973.⁸ Many will remember the memorable event in 1970, at the General Conference session in Atlantic City, New Jersey, when Johansen held up the steel drill-head that had been used to drill into the rock beneath the cold Icelandic landscape in 1967 to find heat for the mission school, Hlidardalskoli. "Government geologist shook their heads. No use trying to tap the geothermal heat at Olfusi, site of our mission school. It is a cold spot on the map."⁹ Regardless, the church leaders tried. Success would mean heat to warm the greenhouses to raise crops, heat to the school plant, and heat to generate electric power. "At first, the attempt seemed futile. But at 3,000 feet, it began to look as though the faith of the leaders was justified. The rock became hotter. Finally, at 3,600 feet, the drill-head broke through to a source of abundant energy."¹⁰ The Secondary School became famous with the highest enrolment ever of 85 in 1973, with approximately 50 percent coming from non-Adventist homes. Another 100 applications had to be turned down. Many young people were baptized at the end of the school year.¹¹ There is no doubt that Johansen took this faith adventure with him into future responsibilities.

Johannsen's next appointment was a three-year term (1973-1975) as preceptor at Vejle fjord High School, Denmark, with responsibility for the boarding students.

Working in West Africa

Johannsen had his first experience with West Africa as president of the Liberian Mission (1965-1968) with 12 churches and a membership of 2,117.¹² He also carried responsibility for the lay activities and temperance departments. When he left, the mission had grown to 19 churches and 2,626 members.¹³

In 1975 he was called back to West Africa to take responsibility as president for the West African Union Mission with its eight countries, 156 churches, and 30,133 members.¹⁴ Evangelism had been strongly emphasized. At the tenth quadrennial session of the union held in Accra, Ghana, in January 1977, baptisms for the four years totaled approximately 10,000, with more than half of the new additions coming from the students in the many schools in the union.¹⁵ Later Johansen reported that just under 100 evangelistic campaigns had been conducted by September that same year and another 2,000 people were baptized.¹⁶

In January 1978 work was organized in the Peoples Republic of Benin, and a young missionary couple, Pastor and Mrs. Claude Lombart, was sent there to lead out.¹⁷ There were four French-speaking countries in the union,

but the church had not yet reached out there with its health message through hospitals and clinics. In 1979 steps were taken to open a clinic in Gleï, Togo. The Seventh-day Adventist church was only one of four Christian denominations that were authorized to operate in this country.¹⁸

Johansen's service to the West African Union Mission ended when he was called to the new Africa-Indian Ocean Division in 1981 to serve as field secretary and director for ADRA. At this time, the West African Union Mission had grown to 194 churches and a membership of 46,007 under his leadership.¹⁹

Back to Scandinavia

With his three grown children now living in Denmark, it was time to return to Scandinavia again. From 1982-1984 Johansen was pastor of the Nærum church in Denmark.²⁰ In September 1984 he was called to Sweden to be the administrator for the Hultafors Health Centre and Hospital, near Borås and stayed there until 1988.²¹

Serving in the Middle East

Johansen's next mission responsibility was as president of the Middle East Union Mission (MEU) (1988-1995) with headquarters in Nicosia, Cyprus.²² In addition, he carried the responsibility of communication director. The challenge was finding ways to communicate the gospel in a predominantly Muslim territory. The territory covered 17 countries, some of which were unentered. The headquarters had been in Beirut, Lebanon, for years but because of the civil war (1975-1990) had temporarily been moved to Cyprus, where banking, international travel, and communications with the union's other countries were easier to carry out.

From 1990 Global Mission (GM)²³ figured high on the world church agenda, and the countries of the Middle East, which to a great extent lay inside the 10/40 window with millions of unreached people, became a prime focus for mission. Under the leadership of Johansen and with strong support from the General Conference to which the union was directly attached, several initiatives were taken to reach out to the unreached. In 1988, a Section for the Gulf countries had been opened, and a pastor placed in Kuwait.²⁴ Immigrant Adventists, mainly from Southern Asia and the Far East, met in organized churches in Kuwait, Dubai, and Ras Al Khaimah, and companies in Bahrain, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Oman.²⁵ In Saudi Arabia up to 100 Adventists from abroad worked in health care. Global Mission seminars organized by the MEU were conducted in some of these places to help immigrant workers reach out to friends and fellow workers in their communities. In 1992 the Adventist Media Centre (AMC) opened in Nicosia. Programs were prepared in Arabic, Farsi, and English and beamed across the Middle East through Adventist World Radio.²⁶ The Bible Correspondence School connected with the AMC received numerous letters requesting more information, Bibles, and literature. Many young people were working in outreach programs attracting Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.²⁷ From 1993 about 50 Global Mission teams were placed in as many target areas in seven countries, most of them in Sudan. The result was hundreds of new converts and an Adventist presence established in new places.²⁸

The activities of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) had increased considerably, with the program directed from Khartoum in Sudan being one of the largest ADRA programs worldwide.²⁹ New offices were also opened in Jordan (1990),³⁰ Yemen (1994),³¹ and in Nairobi (1994), Kenya,³² for southern Sudan with Johansen as chairman on their boards. Of particular interest is the ADRA office in Nairobi with operations inside southern Sudan that were controlled by the rebel organization Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). By negotiating with the SPLA for relief and development projects in the area they controlled, the Adventist church could re-enter this part of Sudan and establish contact with remaining members, train pastors and teachers, and build up the church again. Johansen sent two of his union departmental directors (Neergaard, ADRA and Ministerial, and Sven H. Jensen, Church Ministries, and union evangelist) to meet with church representatives from southern Sudan in 1994, lay plans and begin the training programs.³³

Through Global Mission efforts and traditional evangelism, church growth in the MEU happened primarily in the Sudan and the Gulf countries during Svein B. Johansen's administration. The Muslim strongholds of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and even Lebanon, where the investment of human and material resources had been focused in the past, were ravaged by wars and internal conflict. These conditions led to a drain of members looking for safety and better opportunities outside their countries. Nevertheless, through his eight years in the Middle East Johansen saw the church membership increase about 75 percent.³⁴

Final Year and Legacy

Before his retirement, Johansen was asked in 1996 to take a short term as ADRA director for Gambia in West Africa.³⁵ In the summer, he and his wife, Anna, paid a visit to Denmark to see the family. But their return to Gambia was delayed because Johansen had developed a lung disease, that quickly proved incurable. He never returned to his mission post but died in January 1997.³⁶ He had served his church for almost 40 years.

As an able and visionary leader with wide experience Johansen used his talents in some of the more challenging parts of the world and to prepare his younger colleagues for future work. These were his last words: "The greatest possibilities of mission lie in the future. Territories that seem closed will be opened. God's cause will go from victory to victory until Jesus comes."³⁷

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14. Ibid., 1976, 235.
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33. *Ibid.*
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