Adventism among European Settlers in Colonial Kenya

GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist church came to Western Kenya*.
European colonial rule in British East Africa began in the year 1895. Almost immediately, the British government constructed a railway to link the coastal city of Mombasa and Lake Victoria in the hinterland. This was completed in December 1901. To pay for the railway, the new Administration encouraged settler farmers to take up land in the highlands. Soon thousands of farmers were taking up land in what came to be known as the White Highlands. It was not until 1906 when the first Adventist missionaries arrived there. They primarily focused their work on the African people. The establishment of Adventism in British East Africa among the European settlers came later, specifically through the period 1911 to 1963.

The Coming of Adventism to British East Africa

The Seventh-day Adventist church first came to British East Africa (later named Kenya) in 1906 through the work of missionaries Peter Nyambo, Arthur Carscallen and his wife Hellen Thompson. They established the Gendia Mission on the eastern shores of Lake Victoria and began their work among the Luo people. There was no organized effort to reach the European settlers who were occupying the fertile highlands of Kenya. It was not until a South African farmer named David Sparrow and his family took up land in the highlands and became the first European non-missionary Adventists in British East Africa.¹

The Sparrows arrived in British East Africa in December 1911 and settled to farm the Uasin Gishu Plateau on the west. They began to spread the Gospel message among the Nandi people bringing to the faith several people and families and planting a church before they returned to South Africa in 1941. The Sparrows had become Adventists in 1890 in Grahamstown in South Africa forming the Rokeby Park Seventh-day Adventist church –Africa’s third church. Other than reaching out to the Nandi, the Sparrows reached out to the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking European settlers who farmed the plateau. The distributed tracts in both languages into their homes.

The Early Growth of the Church

The next Adventist to settle on the Plateau after the Sparrows was Mrs. Kruger who had become an Adventist in the Orange Free State in South Africa before coming to British East Africa in 1913. She came with her husband Hendrik Willem Kruger and their two sons.² Hendrik was not an Adventist when they came but through his wife’s effort, he joined the faith while in Kenya together with their two sons. The Krugers settled in Kitale, about 60 miles from the Sparrow farm. This meant that they could not hold regular Sabbath services as often as they would have liked. The fastest way to get there was by ox-cart and if they had to meet, one week went into that arrangement. The Sparrows would leave on Wednesday morning to arrive on Friday evening at the Kruger farm in time for Sabbath. They then left on Sunday to arrive on their farm on Tuesday evening.

In 1925 David Sparrow’s older brother Christopher Sparrow came to Kenya with his wife Mahalah and their son Willis adding to the Adventist numbers. David Sparrow’s daughter Alvinah returned to South Africa while their now grown son Bert Sparrow remained in Kenya. He married Ida Billes in 1930 and had a son named Derek. In 1931 William Cuthbert and his wife Florence, formerly missionaries in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, settled to farm at Lemook on the land that joined Sparrow’s farm. This added to the Adventist numbers. In 1932 another Afrikaner farmer Thysus de Lange took up land in Kitale near the Krugers. Before moving to Kenya, he lived in Ventersdorp in South Africa where he worked as a blacksmith. He came to Kenya with his wife Wilma Gradwell together with their children Rodney, Verna and Mavis.³ Together with the Krugers they formed the core of the church at Kitale.

The Church in the Highlands

The European settlers then organized themselves into a church and met regularly in their homes thanks to improvements in transportation. William Cuthbert, a renowned colporteurr and pastor turned farmer, served as their Head Elder while Christopher Sparrow became the Sabbath School Superintendent for the group. William Cuthbert worked hard for the establishment of a church in the African reserve. Strict laws barred Europeans and Africans from mingling socially but Cuthbert and Sparrow helped establish an Adventist church and school at Kaigat inside the Nandi Reserve in 1933 and occasionally the other European Adventists worshipped with them there. The East Africa Union Superintendent Spencer G. Maxwell also visited the nascent congregations during these times and publishing their progress in various church magazines of the day. When they had formal occasions like weddings and funerals, the Adventists in Eldoret borrowed the St. Matthews Church, an Anglican church that was established in 1927.

In 1935 Christopher Sparrow died following a tragic train accident. He did not see an oncoming train as he crossed the tracks in his car. His car was smashed and he was severely injured. He died in hospital a week later and was laid to rest in Eldoret. His wife Mahalah (May) chose to return to Solusi in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia. Their son Willis sold the land and moved to Eldama Ravine before again leaving Kenya for Tanganyika. The exit of this family greatly reduced the numbers of the Adventists. At the end of 1935, William Cuthbert rented a large building in the middle of Eldoret town and designated it to be an Adventist meeting place. He had it fitted up as an assembly hall with seating for over fifty people. Now it became apparent that with about ten people in attendance the meeting hall was too big for them. They then decided that they should hold an evangelistic campaign in the area.

By 1936 the European Adventist congregation in Eldoret and Kitale had grown to include some 20 adult individuals representing various families and one child. During a visit by Spencer Maxwell in March 1936, he took a photograph
of the 21 individuals. He reported to Southern African Division Outlook that all of them had come up from South Africa except one family which came from England (the Cuthberts). The South Africans included Hendrik Kruger and Thuys de Lange whose sister Nellie was the wife of Laurie Sparrow the second son of Christopher Sparrow. At the time of that photo, Christopher Sparrow had just died but his wife May and son Willis were still in Kenya. Due to the fact that they lived vast distances apart, they came together for a joint Sabbath service once every quarter (every Thirteenth Sabbath and this one fell on March 28, 1936). It was here that they conducted the Holy Communion. The two congregations also met separately once each month.

Further Evangelism Efforts

In September 1937, the Cuthbert and Sparrow families launched an evangelistic campaign targeting the European settlers of the Uasin Gishu district. Reading literature of Kenya’s colonial period, one gains the impression that many of the European settlers in the so-called ‘White Highlands’ were people with little interest and time for religion. The invitation to the evangelistic meeting therefore required lots of personal persuasion, canvassing and invitation. The Adventists had to contend with lots of rejections. Besides, the Adventists were severely short of funds as only £5 was given to them by the East Africa Union Committee. David Sparrow and William Cuthbert had to dig deep into their pockets to make the campaign a success. They made advertisements in the East African Standard, which at this time was the only national newspaper, inviting the people to meet at the designated hall in Eldoret. It did not go easy for them. Rival advertisements were placed in the same paper by denominations counteracting that of the Adventists. At the opening meeting, some sixty European settlers attended and Pastor Matthew Murdoch, the Chebwai Mission Superintendent, was one of the main speakers. At the end of the campaign, several people accepted the message even requesting for baptism.

In September 1938 six European settlers were baptized into the Adventist church. Two of those baptized were William Cuthbert’s sons. Their baptism brought to twenty the European members who were congregating in Kitale and Eldoret. More evangelistic work was done by the literature evangelist L. A. Vixie who was sent by the Northern European Division following a request by Sparrow.

Literature Evangelism

In 1939 Vixie visited some thirty European homes in the Plateau, securing thirty orders for literature. Vixie conducted a series of Camp meetings and trained literature evangelists of both races in Kenya and in Uganda. David Sparrow and his wife Sallie left Kenya in 1941 to settle in Cape Town but their son Bert Sparrow remained and took over the father’s elected position on the Eldoret Municipality. The following year 1942 David Sparrow’s nephew Hubert M. Sparrow came to Kenya as the superintendent of the East Africa Union taking over from Spencer Maxwell. World War II was raging and the Adventist work was greatly hampered. In June 1945 Elder Cuthbert died on his farm following a brutal attack by one of his workers. He was laid to rest in Eldoret. His wife Florence left for England but their son Maurice remained, serving as a missionary in the South Kenya Conference.

On June 3-7, 1947 the Adventist European settlers held their first camp meeting at the Nyanchwa Mission in Kisii. They pitched a tent in which they held the services. There were some eighty families in attendance, among them settlers from Kenya and Tanganyika and missionaries from the three East African nations. Thuys de Lange represented the European laity from Kenya. For the Kitale Adventists attending this camp meeting involved some 150 miles of travelling one way. Notably absent were the Krugers of Kitale and Herbert Sparrow from Eldoret although Willis Sparrow son of Chris Sparrow was there with his family. He had since moved to Tanganyika.

Consolidating the Work

In 1955, Pastor D. L. Ringer, an American, was appointed to oversee the work among the European settlers. Before taking up the job, Pastor Ringer had served as a minister in the Upper Columbia Conference in the United States before moving to Kenya in 1954 to become the assistant director at the Ranen Mission Station in the South Nyanza region. In 1956, E. D. Hanson, the president of the East African Union Mission, created the Highlands Mission specifically to take care of the work among the Europeans. Pastor Ringer was appointed the superintendent of the Highlands Mission. He was now based in Eldoret and had two churches (Eldoret and Kitale) whose membership had risen to a total of 53.

Decline

In December 1957 Pastor Ringer and Elder Hendrik W. Kruger, the leader of the Adventists in Kitale, applied for a plot to construct a church. On May 29, 1958 the East African Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was allocated Kitale plot no. 39 Section VII measuring 1.379 acres for 99 years with effect from June 1, 1958. The Adventists in Kitale began construction of the church which had a similar design as the church in Nairobi (what is today the Old Sanctuary at Nairobi Central SDA Church). The construction was however severely hampered by the impending independence of Kenya and many of the settlers began to move out of Kenya starting from 1962.

By 1963, the church had stalled completely as the last of the Europeans including the Krugers had left. Thuys and Wilma returned to South Africa settling on a farm in Tzaneen, north of South Africa. He passed away in Heidelberg in
the Transvaal in 1987.\textsuperscript{12} In February 1963, Magdalon E. Lind, the president of the East African Union, opened discussions with Mr. D. Saunders of the Baptist Mission of East Africa who had approached them with view of taking over the unfinished church building and plot in Kitale. Lind wrote to the Town Clerk at Kitale stating the position. On May 29, 1963 law firm Kaplan & Stratton wrote to the Town Clerk in Kitale stating that the World Wide Advent Mission Ltd (the firm owned by the church) was transferring the land to the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and therefore needed a Clearance Certificate to facilitate the transfer. The Town Clerk did send the Clearance Certificate but indeed there was no evidence that the plot was paid for by the Baptists and there was therefore no transfer. As such, the plot legally remains the property of the Seventh-day Adventist Church only that it is occupied and used by the Baptist Church in Kitale.\textsuperscript{13} Herbert Sparrow remained and served as the last European mayor of Eldoret (1962-1963). He left for England. It was not until 1969 that an Adventist church was reestablished in Eldoret, this time by the Africans.

SOURCES


NOTES


2. Ibid.

3. From an online interview with his relative Peggy de Lange in South Africa.


6. Ibid.


8. From the Sparrow family archives availed by Michael M. Sparrow of South Africa.


10. Ibid.


12. From an online interview with his relative Peggy de Lange in South Africa.

13. Sang et al., \textit{On the Wings of a Sparrow}.