

Cuthbert, William

(1890–1945)

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William Cuthbert was a pioneer Adventist missionary, lay minister and evangelist.

Early Years

William Cuthbert was born in 1890 in March in Cambridgeshire, England.¹ His parents were Baptist, and he was raised in that church until 1910 when he became a Seventh-day Adventist. He then enrolled in Stanborough Park College (now Newbold College). He supported his education through literature sales, operating mainly in north England. He graduated in 1916 and then entered into the ministry. In October of that same year, he married Florence Wray, also a graduate of Stanborough Park College. Their eldest child, Raymond Cuthbert, was born on June 16, 1917, in Cannock, Staffordshire, while their second son, Maurice, was born on November 25, 1919, in Southampton.² Raymond later joined the British Army, fighting in World War II while Maurice would join the ministry in his father's footsteps.

William Cuthbert obtained his ministerial license in 1917 under the Midland Conference that was based in Birmingham, England.³ He served at Wolverhampton and also pastored in various congregations in Birmingham.⁴ In 1921, he was appointed as the Field Mission secretary in the South British Conference that had been organized in 1921.⁵ In 1922, he was ordained into the ministry.

Moving to Africa

That same year, he accepted the call to enter the mission work in East Africa. He was to take up residence at the Ntusu Mission in northern Tanganyika. He sailed with his wife and children (Raymond, who was then 5, and



William Cuthbert

Photo courtesy of British Union Conference.

Maurice, then 3).⁶ Also in the same boat from England were two other missionary families--H. A. Matthews, who would be serving in Kenya, and A. F. Bull, who was going to the Pare Missions in southern Tanganyika. After arriving in Mombasa, EAU Superintendent William Bartlett met them and travelled back with them to Gendia while Bull proceeded on the same boat to Tanga.⁷

After spending a few days at Gendia while William Cuthbert recuperated from an illness, they eventually crossed the lake and disembarked in Mwanza. It was from here that they began a two-day travelled on foot to Ntusu, the Mission. He remained at Ntusu for a year before moving on to Ikizu, also in northern Tanganyika. He worked together with A. Watson and E. B. Phillips at Busegwe.⁸ Cuthbert settled in at Ntusu among the Sukuma people, serving in various stations, among them Itilima, Kanadi, and Mwagala of the Lake Region. He also oversaw the work in the Majita and Ushashi districts. The following year, 1923, he came to Gendia at Kendu Bay, where he continued his work for about a year before again returning to Tanganyika in 1924. Pastor Cuthbert now worked as the superintendent of the Mwanza Mission, which was based at Ikizu in Musoma, northern Tanzania.⁹

In 1929, Cuthbert moved back to Kenya where he joined Spencer Maxwell in his work at the East Africa Union Mission based in Nakuru. He was appointed the departmental secretary for Publishing and Home Missions,¹⁰ and he also sat in the Committee of the Kavirondo Press, which is today the Africa Herald Publishing House at Kendu Bay. In this position, Cuthbert pioneered the colporteur ministry, recruiting and training many Africans in literature evangelism. He also travelled to Uganda, where he trained Ugandan workers in literature evangelism, recording remarkable success.¹¹

Work as a Literature Evangelist

While based at Nakuru, Cuthbert travelled to the various farms as an itinerant pastor for the European Adventist settlers while performing evangelism work among the other settler farmers. In Eldoret was David Sparrow and his brother Christopher Sparrow. In Kitale was Hendrik W. Kruger and Thuys de Lange. Cuthbert and his wife Florence immediately became friends with various settlers on the plateau as part of their work under Home Missions. They also met rotationally in the homes of the Adventists on a regular basis. In December 1929, William Cuthbert announced the publication of a book for colporteurs in a Nigerian language to pioneer the work of literature evangelism in West Africa.¹² He also worked on a similar book for the Ethiopian (Abyssinian) field, and both were published in Kenya. He was later released from Home Missions, then working full-time in training African literature evangelists.¹³

Leaving the Ministry

In 1931, Cuthbert decided to leave active missionary work. On March 2, 1931, the East Africa Union (EAU) Committee voted to accept his resignation as Field Mission Secretary despite the personal pleas by Maxwell for him to reconsider. Maxwell felt that they were shorthanded in a fast-growing Mission field.¹⁴ The Division

advised the EAU to pay Cuthbert nine months' salary starting from April 1, 1931, and release him.¹⁵

Cuthbert then acquired land at Lemook near the Nandi Reserve and moved there with his family. His land was just across the river from the home of David Sparrow, the pioneer Seventh-day Adventist settler who arrived in British East Africa (Kenya) in 1911. The two families congregated on Sabbath often at the Sparrow farm, which already had a vibrant Adventist congregation that was drawn from among others the workers on the farm. It was from here that Cuthbert assisted the church planting work at Kaigat in the Nandi Reserve.

Work among the Nandi and the European Settlers

For the next five years, Cuthbert worked among the Nandi closely and even became well known to the pioneers at Kaigat. He was known to them simply as *Kaspat*. However, on his farm, the Nandi gave him the nickname *KipleIngobiet* (the one with a white hat) because he often sported a white hat.¹⁶ Officially, Cuthbert was designated as the head elder while Chris Sparrow, David Sparrow's older brother (also a settler farmer), became the Sabbath School superintendent for the group.¹⁷ In 1935, Chris Sparrow died in a train accident, and Cuthbert conducted his funeral service.

William Cuthbert worked hard for the establishment of a permanent church for the Europeans in Eldoret. The Depression had set in, so most farmers were struggling financially. At the end of 1935, he secured a large building in the middle of Eldoret town and designated it as an Adventist meeting place.¹⁸ He had it fitted up as an assembly hall with seating for more than 50 people. Now it became apparent that, with about ten people in regular 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 Adventists in Eldoret and Kitale had about 20 adult individuals representing various families. All of them, except the Cuthberts, were originally from South Africa. They lived far apart, and they only held a joint service once every quarter.

In September 1937, David Sparrow and William Cuthbert conducted an evangelistic campaign in Eldoret targeting the European population.¹⁹ They placed advertisements in the leading newspaper of the day, the *East African Standard*, inviting the Europeans of the Uasin Gishu to attend the campaign. The main speaker was Pastor Matthew Murdoch, the superintendent of the North-West Kenya Mission based in Chebwai in Western Kenya. Despite the funding challenges and lots of other problems (this was still the height of the Depression), they held a successful meeting. A year later in September 1938, six Europeans were baptized into the Adventist church, significantly improving the numbers. Two of those baptized were William Cuthbert's sons, Maurice and his older brother. In 1938, Cuthbert tried his hand in politics when he ran in the Kipkarren Ward to become a member of the Uasin Gishu District Council. He lost to Major C. E. Browne.²⁰ His son Maurice joined the army in 1939 to fight in World War II and rose to the rank of sergeant.

Tragic Death

On June 1, 1945, William Cuthbert was killed on his farm at Lemook when he got into a fight with one of his workers. The young Nandi man named Chepsiror araap Butuk stabbed him to death following an altercation.²¹ Pastor Willie Marais was now in charge of the work among the Europeans on the Plateau under the North-West Kenya Mission.²² The service was held at the St. Matthews Anglican Church in Eldoret, which had been borrowed by the Adventists for his funeral.²³ He was survived by his widow Florence and their two sons, the younger of whom, Maurice Cuthbert, had just returned from the war. Florence sold the land and left the country while Maurice went to Helderberg College to study for the ministry. He became an active missionary and church administrator in Kenya and also in several other countries in Africa, eventually returning to England.

Legacy

As a lay pastor, William Cuthbert continued in ministry, conducting evangelistic campaigns among the Europeans and Africans alike. Despite leaving the official ministry that had brought him to Africa, he remained active in the church and was probably more productive that way. He was unofficially in charge of the Adventist congregation in the highlands, working both among the Africans and the Europeans. He also continued with literature evangelism, in which he excelled. The death of Cuthbert definitely caused serious shock among the Africans and the Europeans alike.

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