

Sabah Mission

CHARLES S. GABAN, AND JIBIL SIMBAH

Charles S. Gaban was the secretary of the Sabah Mission from 1975 to 1978. During this same time, he was also responsible for the Education, Youth, and Communication Departments. After completing an EdD from Andrews University in 1982, he returned to Sabah and served as the Sabah Mission president from 1983 to 1994.

Jibil Simbah began his ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Mission of Sabah in May 2002 following graduation from Mountain View College in Philippines. He is currently the executive secretary of Seventh-day Adventist Mission of Sabah.

The territory of the Sabah Mission encompasses the Malaysian state of Sabah and the Malaysian Federal Territory of Labuan. The Sabah Mission is in the Southeast Asia Union Mission of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division. It was organized in 1961. In 2018, the mission had 145 churches and 32,184 members among a population of 3,734,050.¹

According to the 2015 Department of Statistics of Malaysia, Sabah's religious statistics comprised of 65.4 percent Islam, 26.6 percent Christianity, 6 percent Buddhism, and 2 percent other. Sabah also had 31 different ethnic groups and subgroups and over 80 languages or dialects.² The Dusun people are the largest group of the church's membership in Sabah.

Origin of SDA Work in the Sabah Mission

According to Milton Hook's book on the history of Seventh-day Adventist work in the Orient, in the first few months of 1909, Lee Chong Miow was the first to go to Borneo to canvass.³ The article "The Story of Our Mission Fields for 1909" says that "Brother Lee Chong Miow made a canvassing trip into Borneo and remained a short time. With this exception, nothing has been done in this land of Dayaks and wild men."⁴

Sabah was still considered an "unentered field" at the beginning of 1912. Later that year, Phang Soon Siew, a part-time colporteur and early convert in Singapore, arrived. The "Asiatic Division Newsletter" of October 1912 reported, "Good news from Borneo. A Chinese Sabbath-keeper from the church in Singapore has been working as colporteur for the British and Foreign Bible Society in Borneo, and at the same time he has been sowing the seeds of present truth."⁵ Its next month's issue reported, "It is encouraging to know that we have a work begun in an unentered field and Sabbath-keepers brought out by Chinese workers."⁶ Early in 1912, Mr. Phang approached his Singapore brethren and requested a job. He wanted to work for the mission, but it could not employ him. He went to the Malay States and was employed by the British and Foreign Bible Society. They sent him to Sabah, and he arrived around mid-1912.⁷

Mr. Phang was accompanied by a male friend to assist him. Before they left, they supplied themselves with a good number of books and tracts from Singapore. Upon their arrival in Jesselton, they began to sell books and give Bible studies. These Bible studies resulted in many people deciding to keep the Sabbath. Mr. Chan, the evangelist for the Singapore Mission, maintained correspondence on a regular basis with Mr. Phang and the new believers in Jesselton. Mr. Phang would ask Mr. Chan to send him literature for distribution.

Below is one of the letters Mr. Phang wrote to Mr. Chan. This letter was written on September 2, 1912.

Dear Mr. Chan,

Herewith I am sending you a letter written by Mr. Enn Fook. The brethren whom I mentioned in my last letters are Wang Tau An and Wang Yuan Lai. They thoroughly studied this Sabbath question, and have decided to keep the Seventh-day. They are very brave to bear testimony for the truth, and whenever they meet any who are willing to study, they gladly take time to study with them. Of course, the other missions are very angry. The English letter which I enclose is written by the brethren here to petition you to open up work here, and, as you will take this matter up with other workers and come or send someone very soon. The people here are like sheep without a shepherd, but they are honest and earnest, and anxious to learn more of the truth. Please send by return mail ten copies of the hymn book, also tracts on 'The Lord's Day', 'Answers to Common Objections,' 'Second Coming of Christ,' and 'The Sabbath Treaties.'⁸

In response to this urgent call Mr. Chan came to Jesselton early October 1912. Upon his return to Singapore he wrote to his daughter, Mrs. C. M. Lee, in Shanghai and gave a report of his visit to Sabah. The following is an excerpt of the letter he wrote as reported in the Monthly News Letter of the Asiatic Division:

In answer to several urgent calls, I went to Borneo the first part of October. The first Sabbath after my arrival, quite a number closed their doors and kept the Sabbath of Jehovah. Now I want to tell you more fully about these people. The first man that accepted the truth is one Tsen En Fook, who is employed by the Land Office of Jesselton, Borneo; his mother-in-law and her four daughters also believe. They are people who are acquainted with the Bible. Among the four daughters two are still in the school of the ___ Mission. When the teachers of the school knew the two girls' family had begun to keep the Sabbath, they used every method to keep them from seeing the truth, so these two girls were misled for some time. The first two nights after I came to Jesselton I made use of the public reading room of the town to give lectures to the public. The first night I presented the second chapter of Daniel showing that Christ will set up his everlasting kingdom in the very near future; and the second night the four beasts of Daniel 7, showing that the little horn and the prophecies concerning it are fulfilled in the papacy, and calling their attention to the prediction, 'He shall think to change times and laws,' and to the fact that the papacy has sought to change the Sabbath of the commandment. The third night I was going to open meeting at the same place, but the man in charge, influenced by someone who opposed the truth,

would not let me do so. He said they had received a cable from Singapore concerning some important matter for which they would have to use the place to meet with their members.

It happened just at this time that Mr. Tsen En Fook's father-in-law, Mr. Wong, came from another town on his regular visit to his family. When he was told that I was there, he came to me, and earnestly desired to learn the truth; so, I sat down with him to study the precious Word. The study continued till daylight. He wrote down everything I spoke. The following night he came again for more instruction. As his business is in the other town, he was obliged to leave the next day. When he went back, he began to preach to his friends, some of whom are preachers and ministers of other missions. Some accepted the truth. They asked me to go over there, and this I did.

The same night, one of the ministers asked if I would object to be questioned. I said, 'No harm'. Then he said, 'I was told that the people testify that the pope changed the Sabbath. I am afraid this your own explanation. Have you any proof?' In answer to this I gave him a long study. Still he was not quite satisfied; so, on the morrow he went to the Catholic priest, and asked about the change of the Sabbath. Not only did the priest not deny this fact, but he quoted many proofs to show that the Roman Catholic Church is the only church upon the earth that has power to do this. This convinced the minister that the papacy had done the very thing foretold in Daniel 7. When he came again to Jesselton, Mr. Wong related to his family what this man had heard from the priest, and his two daughters, who were wavering, decided to keep the commandments. Both the mother and the daughters are bearing testimony for the truth every day. Whenever the school teachers or the ministers come to their house to exhort them to keep Sunday, the two daughters give them Bible tracts that they are not able to explain or ask questions that they are unable to answer. Now instead of their coming to Mr. Wong's house, Mrs. and the Misses Wong from time to time visit their wives (the teachers' and ministers' wife's) and exhort them to obey God rather than man. They have good opportunities every day to preach this last message.

Mrs. Wong's father was a minister. One of her brothers is a member of what was the National Academy, under the old regime in China; another is a minister in the Sandwich Islands. Her mother is more than eighty years old, and still working as Bible worker. Since she accepted the truth, Mrs. Wong has sent quite several tracts and papers to them. She requested our foreign worker in Singapore to ask our workers in the Sandwich Islands to visit her mother and brother there. When I was in Jesselton, the Misses Wong were doing personal work among their relatives. These two young ladies wish very much to come to Singapore to be trained as workers in the third angel's message.

Some of the men believers have already resigned their good positions in foreign business concerns and are doing such work as they can earn their living, that they may be free to observe the Lord's Sabbath. On Sabbaths they close their shops and post a notice on the door, saying 'This is Sabbath Day. No business done in this shop.' This a new thing in these towns, as the Sunday keepers never close their shops. I very earnestly pray that the Lord will bless the seed sown there, and ere long much fruit will be borne to the glory of his name.⁹

Official Organization of Mission

On January 1, 1913, a meeting of all the foreign workers was held at Soember Wekas, Java. Elder I. H. Evans from the Asiatic Division was present at this meeting. Most of the time of the meeting was spent in studying the field and its needs, and many plans were laid for the advancement of the work. During this meeting, it was decided to release Pastor R. P. Montgomery, the secretary/treasurer of the Malaysian Mission, from his position to go to North Borneo. Elder Evans reported to the Asiatic Division in February 1913 that the release of Pastor Montgomery from his responsibility in Singapore was so “that he could go to North British Borneo to open up and take charge of the work there.” Brother Chan, the oldest and most experienced worker in Singapore, was also transferred to Sabah to labor with Pastor Montgomery. It was during this meeting that the Federated Malay States was separated from Singapore, and a new mission was organized for Sabah called British North Borneo, with Pastor R. P. Montgomery in charge.¹⁰

Since Sandakan was the capital of Sabah, it was decided to station both workers and their families there. On May 31, 1913, they left Singapore on the German ship, *Marudu*, for Sandakan accompanied by Pastor Detamore, who was then the superintendent of the Malaysian Mission. The Malaysian Mission was made up of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The British Malaya consisted of the Straits Settlements, the Federated and Non-federated Malay states of the Malay Peninsula, and North Borneo. At Jesselton, Mr. Tsen En Fook, the first person to accept the truth, came on board and accompanied them to Sandakan. On arrival in Sandakan on June 8, 1913, Tsen En Fook took them to his house until they could find quarters of their own. Elder Detamore stated in a letter written from Sandakan on June 11, 1913, to the Asiatic Division: “It is a pleasant, roomy house, located over the city, in a spot freely swept by cool breezes. A nice spring of water is near at hand also.”¹¹

One month after their arrival in Sandakan, Pastor Montgomery and Brother Chan rented a place to be used as a chapel. To this he wrote, “We rented the lower half of a room in the city and fitted it up for a chapel, holding our first meeting July 20. The room was full, and the people were quite attentive while Brother Chan preached an introductory sermon on the message for this time. We have a large audience every night, and one of the most encouraging features is that the attendance is regular... We have an attendance of about thirty at our Sabbath school.”¹²

In November 1915, Pastor Montgomery and his wife left for furlough. Pastor Roy Merson came to Sandakan to relieve him. When Pastor Detamore came to visit Pastor Merson in July of the following year, a property consisting of six acres that had a large house on it was purchased in Sandakan. “This is high above the sea on a commanding hill where the breezes blow fresh from the sea all the year, and where one gets a beautiful view of the ocean and valley below...We feel thankful to our brethren in the homeland that they have given us the means that make it possible for us to purchase this good place.”¹³ Sandakan remained the location of the headquarters of the mission until the end of 1922.

Early in 1923, the headquarters for the mission was transferred to Jesselton. This transfer was made possible as a result of the sale of an old mission property in Sandakan, which was perceived as "suitable for residential purposes only." In exchange for this old property in Sandakan, the mission received a good home and a school site with funds for building a chapel in Sandakan. In addition, the mission was also given a three-acre tract of land on a high elevation in Jesselton. The transfer of the property included sufficient funds to build a new mission home, a chapel, a church school, and a home for the school teacher at Jesselton. It was because of these advantages that British North Borneo received its full recognition as a mission in 1923!¹⁴ North Borneo was organized as a mission on January 1, 1923, but it was recognized as a mission in October 1923.

The first conference was held in Sabah in October 1923. In former years, they had held general meetings and institutes, but nothing like a conference had been held. Delegates present had come from seven churches and companies of believers from Sandakan, Kudat, Jesselton, Papar, Beaufort, Tenom, and Mengatal. During this conference, Pastor C. C. Crisler reported that North Borneo as of October 29, 1923, had 144 baptized members.¹⁵ They were mostly from the Chinese community. Work among the natives had just started.

Development of Chinese Congregations

By July 1913, a good number of Chinese-speaking people, including Mr. Wong and his family and Tsen En Fook, had accepted and kept the Saturday Sabbath truth, but none of them had been baptized yet. On August 2, 1913, Pastor Montgomery left Sandakan with Tsen En Fook for a visit to some of the coast towns of British North Borneo. They spent one day in Kudat and one in Jesselton. They sold a good number of Chinese books and pamphlets and also visited those who had expressed interests in the Sabbath truth. Their next stop was Labuan. At Labuan, Pastor Montgomery conducted the first baptism in Sabah on August 12, 1913. Those baptized were Mr. Wong, his wife and three daughters, and Chen En Fook.

In his report, Pastor Montgomery wrote:

At this place loving hospitality had shown us by Brother Wong and his family, who were among the first Sabbath Keepers in Borneo. We greatly enjoyed the nine days which we spent at the home of this family, and appreciated the privilege of studying the Word together, and singing many of the songs of Zion. As this family had not yet been instructed on all points of truth, I gave a study on baptism one evening. After the study we read several passages of scripture on the wearing of jewelry. The mother and three oldest daughters wear earrings, and I did not know how they would receive the study. The next morning, however, all four appeared without the earrings. This experience brought great joy to me. They are all willing and anxious to obey the instruction given in God's Word. August 12, we went a distance of about two miles from their home, and the father, mother, three daughters, and En Fook, the young who accompanied me from Sandakan, were baptized in the waters of the South China Sea.¹⁶

The beginning of the work in Sandakan met considerable opposition due to the Torrey-Canright tract that came from Swatow, China. This tract had been translated and published to oppose the Sabbath doctrines. The Saturday Sabbath truth was not difficult for people to accept, but the understanding on how it was to be observed tended to hold people from making a decision to be baptized; this was true in those days. The issue on jewelry and earrings made the decision to accept baptism more difficult. After hard and earnest work, Pastor Montgomery and Brother Chan's efforts produced baptism results. On April 5, 1914, seven Chinese people, four women and three men, were baptized in Sandakan. Pastor Montgomery wrote, "It was a severe test for the women to give up their jewelry, especially their earrings, but they bravely laid all aside."⁷

By December 1923, after 11 years, the British North Borneo Mission had 144 baptized members. All were from the Chinese community, but none were from among the natives. Language and the lack of literacy among the natives were the main barriers in any attempt to reach them with the gospel message. Pastor Detamore and Pastor Mershon were both fluent in Chinese. They and Brother Chan were able to reach the Chinese-speaking community. When Pastor Mershon left in October 1928 for furlough, Pastor J. W. Rowland took his place as director of the British North Borneo Mission. In the report at the January 1923 Biennial Session, Pastor Rowland stated, "The work is on the upward trend, although among the Chinese it has been moving very slowly."⁸

Development of Native Congregations

The first missionaries sent by the Malaysian Union to North Borneo to work among the Dusuns (indigenous tribe) in early 1923 were Johannes Passarebo and his wife from the land of Batak. He was assigned to work at Menggatal. From October 1-10, 1927, the British North Borneo Mission held its annual meeting in Kudat. At this meeting, it was planned to divide the mission into two districts and assign two of the most experienced Chinese workers to be in charge. The purpose was to give Pastor Mershon more time to devote to work among the natives.

After the meeting, Pastor Mershon accompanied Pastor L. V. Finster to visit Tenghilan and Menggatal. At Menggatal, they organized the first Dusun church. In Pastor Finster's report to the Asiatic Division, he stated, "While at Menggatal, it was our privilege to organize the first Dusun church. This is the first church organized among this tribe by any denomination. Brother Passarebo, who has spent nearly four years in working among the Dusuns, is now beginning to see the fruits of his labor."⁹

The next worker called from the land of Batak to work among the Dusuns was Pastor Sibarani, who was assigned to work in Tuaran early in 1926. He pioneered the work for the natives from Tuaran to Tenghilan and Kayangat. By December 1927, a school in Tenghilan had started. After four years, Brother Passarebo witnessed the organization of the first church among the Dusuns: Menggatal Church.²⁰

In 1927, Brother M. Agian was then sent to work among the Muruts at Tenom. The work was progressing very rapidly among the natives. Soon, M. T. Sibadogil, M. J. Hutabarat, and D. P. Siagian from the land of Batak were recruited to reinforce the number of workers among the natives. With the arrival of more Batak workers to Sabah, the Seventh-day Adventist work among the Dusuns grew stronger. The July 1937 report shows a considerable growth of Adventist presence in Borneo.²¹ On April 9, 1948, D. P. Siagian, treasurer of the mission, was ordained.²² His ordination provided an added strength to the work because it meant having the services of another ordained minister.

Sabah Training School/Sabah Adventist Secondary School

The "Win One Movement," a resolution that was unanimously adopted earlier by the plans committee, produced very encouraging results in the North Borneo Mission. In two years, 1936 and 1937, they had gained 68 baptisms. This made Pastor G. B. Youngberg more determined to start a seminary for the Dusun people. It seemed that, for 25 years, the British North Borneo Chartered Company placed a 50-acre land at the SDA church's disposal for that purpose. This was to be used as an industrial farm where Dusun students could sustain themselves while attending school. A training school was then opened at Menggatal on September 1, 1937. A month later, they had over 50 students enrolled in that school. Brother A. Silalahi was appointed to serve as the school's principal.²³

No additional documents were found regarding this 50-acre land. It was possible that the land would not be at the disposal of the SDA church for the full 25 years and, therefore, not a good place to invest a substantial amount of funds for the development of the training school. The training school continued to operate until the Japanese arrived and occupied North Borneo. In the November 1939 issue of the Far Eastern Division Outlook, Brother E. A. Moon reported that a ten-acre tract of land had been purchased for a Dusun training school. It appeared that Pastor Youngberg and the brethren had found a better location for this purpose than Menggatal. Brother Moon did not mention where this location was, but the description appeared to match the mission's property at Tamparuli. The additional three-acre lot was purchased from Rampas a few years after World War II. An excerpt of Brother E. A. Moon's report when he visited Sabah in October 1939 states:

Brother and Sister Youngberg joined us in studying the layout of the land, with a view to deciding upon the location of each of the various buildings which will soon be erected. At the present time Brother Youngberg is supervising the construction of some of these buildings. We are constructing inexpensive, simple buildings, suitable to the environment of the Dusun people, and we believe that we all have a splendid school plant here in the near future which will have cost us only a reasonable amount of money. We believe that it is better to erect a school plant which is suited to the people for whom it is to be conducted, rather than to erect expensive building of a style and size which would be out of all proportion to those which the people are accustomed to in their own homes and villages.²⁴

There is no indication when the Tamparuli school started operating. However, the construction of the various buildings started in 1939. It is possible they started the following year, 1940, or in 1939 while the construction was going on. After the war, Pastor D. P. Siagian wrote a letter to Pastor V. T. Armstrong on October 25, 1945. In his letter, he indicated that both Menggatal and Tamparuli schools were closed after the Japanese entered Sabah.²⁵

The Japanese occupied Sabah in 1942 when their forces landed in Labuan on January 1. Due to World War II, the production of the Far Eastern Division's "Outlook" was disrupted from February 1942 to March 1945. After the war ended, the next issue was released in April 1945. The Menggatal school closed during the war and then ended operations permanently. In 1947, a school was started at Kitabu Church with M. Agian as its teacher. The school operated for only a year.

Goshen Adventist Secondary School/Sekolah Menengah Advent Sabah

In the early 1950s, several families had settled in the area now known as Goshen. The group included Patriarch Salag Gaban, the father of Dr. Charles S Gaban, Mandatang Gabon, and Assan Gabon. In May 1952, Goshen Adventist Secondary School was registered under the name of Saminggau Luanda. The first teacher was Mandatang Gabon. He was ordained on April 14, 1956, and became the first Kadazan person to be granted a ministerial credential. Today, Kota Marudu has the highest concentration of Seventh-day Adventists in Sabah.

Evolution of Sabah Mission

1913 Organized, North Borneo Mission

1956 Reorganized, Borneo-Brunei-Sarawak Mission

1961 Reorganized North Borneo Mission (SDA Church of North Borneo)

1961 Reorganized Sabah Mission (SDA Church of North Borneo)

1961 Reorganized Sabah Mission (Masehi Advent Hari Ketujuh Daerah Sabah)

Mission Office Addresses

Street: Jalan Tamparuli Lama, 89257 Tamparuli, Sabah, Malaysia, Mail: PO Box 7, 89257 Tamparuli, Sabah, Malaysia.

List of Presidents

Directors: R. P. Montgomery (1915); R. L. Mershon (1918-1920); R. B. Mershon (1921-1923); L. B. Mershon (1924-1928); J. W. Rowland (acting director) (1929); J. W. Rowland (1930-1934); D. S. Kime (1936); G. B. Youngberg (1937-1945).

Superintendent: Robert Youngberg (1948)

Presidents: Robert R. Youngberg (1949-1951); Arthur Mountain (1952-1956); C. G. Oliver (1957-1963); Andrew Peters (1964-1966); G. W. Munson (1967-1971); W. L. Wilcox (1972); R. C. Hall (acting president) (1973-1974); Bruce Johnston (acting president) (1975); Mandatang Gaban (1975-1976); James E. Thurmon (1977-1981); Geoffrey Pauner (1981-1982); Charles S. Gaban (1983-1994); Mansor Ginggaing (1994-2000); Nelver Sikul (2001-2005); Francis Lajanim (2006-2008); Nelson G. Bendah (2009-2010); Koris Konis Sakida Gabu (2011-2015); Nelson G. Bendah (2016-present).

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