

# Wheeler, Ben David (1923–2011)

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GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*.

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Ben David Wheeler was a missionary to Central Kenya, Uganda, Congo and Zimbabwe. He began his ministry in Kenya at the start of the Emergency in colonial Kenya. He worked tirelessly to bring the Gospel message to the Kikuyu people as the head of the Central Kenya Mission.

## Early Life

Ben was born February 20, 1923, in Palatka, Florida. His parents were Josephine Oliva (*née* Hansen) and Anson Wheeler. He was one of five children, the others being Alice M. Wheeler, Joseph, Timothy, and Ira Wheeler. He joined the U.S. Army during World War II and served with the 39th Field Hospital as an X-ray technician both in England and Belgium. He arrived in Normandy just four days after the Allied invasion (which began on June 6, 1944, and is commonly known as D-Day). He then cared for many of the wounded.

## Ministry

After the war, Wheeler made the decision to become a minister. He did his ministerial training at the Southern College in Collegedale, Tennessee. He obtained his B.A. in Religion in 1949. On July 2, 1950, he and Carolina “Ann” Morgan were married in Fletcher, North Carolina. The couple then moved to Washington D.C., where he earned an M.A. from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.

## Missionary Work

Ben began his ministry in Brunswick, Georgia, with the Georgia-Cumberland Conference. In November 1953, they accepted a call to go to Kenya to join the Karura Mission in Nairobi.<sup>1</sup> They sailed from the United States on November 15 aboard the S.S. *Robin Kettering* for Mombasa.<sup>2</sup> They arrived in the middle of the Mau Mau rebellion, which forced many mission-led programs to be cancelled due to the violence. In fact, the Wheelers had to commute from Nairobi in order to avoid the insecurity associated with the rebellion. Outside their fence was the Gachie market in the Kikuyu Reserve, which was notorious for the death of Senior Chief Waruhiu, murdered by the Mau Mau in October 1952, which triggered the Emergency.<sup>3</sup> Ben found that the Karura Mission

had spearheaded the idea of Voice of Prophecy lessons being sent by post in order to avoid direct face-to-face encounter during the war. Known in the Kikuyu language as *Mugambo wa Urathi*, the VOP lessons proved to be very popular and enriched the ministry during that difficult time.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of his first year, Wheeler had 500 people enrolled in his VOP correspondence class. He was proud to announce that one of them was Margaret Kenyatta, daughter of nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta.<sup>5</sup> He also helped produce the first Lesson Quarterly in the Kikuyu language.<sup>6</sup>

## Further Work

Wheeler left Karura in 1962 and moved to Bugema Missionary College in Uganda where he taught theology.<sup>7</sup> He returned briefly to Kenya in 1966 before moving to the Congo where he worked under the South Congo Mission at Kamina, in the Katanga region.<sup>8</sup> He moved back to Uganda, this time to head the Rwenzori Mission in Fort Portal.<sup>9</sup> In 1971, he became the acting president of the Uganda Field.<sup>10</sup> He returned to the United States shortly afterwards. In 1974, he moved to Solusi College in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where he taught theology.<sup>11</sup>

While on furlough from Africa, Wheeler continued with his education, earning an M.Div. from Andrews University in Michigan. He later obtained an M.S. in Public Health from Loma Linda University in California.

## Later Life

In 1983, he permanently returned to the United States after 30 years missionary work in Africa. He pastored in South Carolina until he retired in 1993. After this, he remained in South Carolina. Even in retirement, he continued to be active in ministry.

Wheeler died on February 24, 2011, at the Oconee Medical Center after a brief illness. He was 88. He was survived by his wife, children, and grandchildren.<sup>12</sup>

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### SOURCES

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12. Ben D. Wheeler's obituary, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.davenportfuneralhome.com/obituaries/PastorBen-D-Wheeler>.

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