

Rwenzori Field

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Rwenzori¹ Field is one of the six fields and one mission that currently constitute the Uganda Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Adventist activity in the Rwenzori mountains began in 1946 when M. E. Lind reached Kazingo, located at the foot of the Rwenzori Mountains.

Current Territory and Statistics

The field territory covers the political districts of Kasese, Bundibugyo, Ntoroko, and the mountain areas of the Bunyangabu and Kabarole districts. It has 253 organized churches and 221 companies with an audited church membership of 44,586.² The government estimates the population in the territory to be 1.5 million people,³ resulting in a ratio of one member to every 34 people.

Origin of the SDA Work in Rwenzori Field

The SDA work in the Rwenzori area started at Kazingo in October 1946. The first missionary was a Norwegian pastor by the name of Methuselah Elisha Lind (M. E. Lind) and his wife Elisa Lind⁴. They came from Nchwanga in Bunyoro (the first Adventist station in Uganda) where they had learned some Luganda, a local language widely used in the country. It would become useful in their ministry.

It is said that Lind visited Sir George David Matthew Kamurasi Rukidi III, the king of Toro, and asked him for land where he could establish a mission station. The king convened his council and invited Lind to address it about his request. The council was not willing to allow the new church, observing that whatever the Adventist missionary wanted to offer was already provided by the Catholics and Anglicans already in the area. Indeed,

they had already established churches, schools, and hospitals in the lowland areas of the kingdom. However, the king did not want to disappoint the white man as he wished to establish some friendship with him that would benefit the kingdom. For that reason, he made a unilateral decision in favor of the new missionary and permitted him to enter the area where a majority of the inhabitants are Bakonzo.⁵

Consequently, Lind moved to Kazingo. On October 10, 1946, he launched the first open evangelistic crusade at the place. It is said that when he preached, the Bakonzo from the mountains flocked to the meeting since it was the first formal Christian church to be established among them. Some of those who attended and were baptized at the end of the crusade included Luzi Nzanu, Ibrahim Taaga, Johnson Masereka, Alisiya Tibamanya, Erika Kamakune, Zefaniya Byengonzi, Margret Nyakaisiki, Susana Kyampeho, Torofaina Kakara, Bulasiya Mukirania, Isaleri Ndyoka and Nuha Majambo.⁶ Soon after, members built a church and inaugurated a Grade Three school.⁷

The Establishment of Mitandi Mission Station

Buoyed by the success at Kazingo, Lind sought to expand the mission and in 1947 bought a 240-acre coffee plantation from a white settler by the name of Daniel Fredrick West. The *Mitanda* Estate came to be known as *Mitandi*, which became the seat of the Ruwenzori Mission Station with Lind as its first director. Mitandi then served as the nucleus of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the western region of Uganda. The station oversaw evangelism in several places, namely, Toro Kingdom (Ruwenzori Mountains inclusive), Bunyoro Kingdom, Ankole Kingdom and Kigezi. Pastor Lind preached and baptized people in all these areas. At Mitandi, his first converts included Andereya Bukombi Nyamulhalirya, Daneri Muhindo Muthebuli, Yosiya Maate Mukundi, Yosiya Mugamba, Paulo Kaganda, Erika Mukirania, Ibrahim Balihabuka, Samwiri Muhairwa, Paulo Bukombi, Maliza Biini, Stefano Bwambale, Yowasi Maate Kabundu, and Yosiya Sibenderana.⁸

Growth and Development of the Work in the Ruwenzoris

As the work grew, Lind recruited Pastor Dennis Kaija Bazarra to be stationed at Kazingo. He also engaged several other preachers, including Yovani Bamaturaki whom he placed at Mitandi (1948), Yohana Kibwana and Stanley Mbuyirahi at Karangura (1949), Andereya Bukombi at Bunyangabu (also in 1949), and Samsoni Rwaheru-Mabere (1949). Kasulenge was put under Erifasi Kiima in 1951, the same year Kaghughu was placed under Azalia Bagonza, and in 1952 Yowasi Kajumba was put in charge of Masuli.⁹ Other individuals recruited for additional places included Yosamu Katarwa, Mary Kahinju, Samwiri Kalisya, Samwiri Muhairwa, Mwogera Mbunda, and Samwiri Saiba, just to mention a few. Some of them went to preach in such sites as Rubona (Burongo), Mundongo, Buboty, Mpondwe, Kihembo, Kagorogoro, Kiky, and Bumaate. Every church had an attached school, and during the week the evangelists served as school teachers and on Sabbath they did the preaching.¹⁰

In 1951 Lind realized the need to standardize Mitandi and make it a full primary school. To do that, he would need teachers. So he recruited Erie Bassetlaw from Nchwanga, Johnson Masereka, Ephraim Mujaju, Samson

Mutaghamoka, Gershom Aligawesa and Yereimiya Namaswala. In 1956 the Mitandi school became registered as Mitandi Junior School.¹¹ Despite the civil war in the 1960s, Mitandi progressed well and attained a secondary school status in 1972, thus becoming the first secondary school in the entire Rwenzori Mountain region. Under the leadership of Lind from 1946 to 1953 Ruwenzori Mission Station expanded the church in the region. In 1953 leadership appointed Lind president of Uganda Field with headquarters at Kireka, Kampala.¹²

In 1954 an American missionary of German origin by the name of Pastor John Courtz replaced Lind as head of Mitandi Station. Pastor Courtz was especially interested in the construction of church buildings and schools, using more permanent materials such as bricks and metal roofing instead of wooden poles and grass. He also translated hymns from English into the Runyoro-Rutoro language. To make the mission station financially self-supporting, he reduced the workforce. Courtz led the Ruwenzori Mission Station from 1954 to 1961 when he transferred to the Gitwe Mission in Rwanda.¹³ In 1961 Pastor Robert Pifer from Canada became the third mission station director. He and his wife had three children, and he spent most of his time with the youth who included students of Mitandi Junior Secondary School. The youth responded positively and during his time, many young people were baptized and joined the church. Pifer served the mission station up to 1964.¹⁴

In 1962 Rwenzururu civil war broke out between Batoro—the ruling class—and the Bakonzo—the peasants. Because of the increasing instability, the school closed in 1963. Consequently, leadership transferred Pastor Pifer to the Uganda Field at Kireka in Kampala and the headmaster of Mitandi Junior Secondary School, Mr. Yowasi Mukirania, to Ikoba near Masindi in Bunyoro, and later to Mubende where he started serving as a pastor. The civil war also caused the dispensary at Mitandi to cease operation and the church to be abandoned. Both the school and dispensary re-opened in 1967. By that time many people had lost their lives and property.

To keep the Ruwenzori Mission Station alive, Thorkild Pedersen, a young Danish missionary with a background of military training and service, who was leading the mission station at Katikamu in Luwero, and his wife, Anne Mette were assigned to serve as the Ruwenzori Mission Station director at Mitandi. When Pastor Pedersen arrived at the place in 1964, it was desolate and uninhabitable for expatriates. So he rented a house close to the Nyakasura School where other white missionaries of the Anglican Church were staying while serving as teachers there. A house belonging to Ambassador Kabuzi became his residence and office. He worked with the Toro district administration and the rest of Uganda government to rehabilitate and re-open Mitandi Primary School. Pedersen recruited Mr. Zephaniah Mukirane to serve as the headmaster of the rehabilitated school. In addition to re-opening the church and the dispensary, he established another dispensary at Kitswamba near the Hima Cement Factory. Mr. Patrick Ogwal not only served as the chief nurse of Kitswamba and Mitandi dispensaries, he also revived the Kagorogoro dispensary in the lowland region of the station.¹⁵

Pastor Thorkild Pedersen combined promoting education, healthful living, and rehabilitating the refugees of the Rwenzururu war with the gospel ministry, sending Mr. Yohana Muhindo to the Kahunge refugee camp to preach to the Bakonzo there. Pedersen also provided milk, clothes, and food to the war victims. At the end of the civil

war many refugees came back to the mountains fully converted to Adventism. Most of them settled in such places as Kitswamba, Maliba, Karugutu, Kikyo, Bumaate, and other parts of Bundibugyo. Others went to Kagadi in Bunyoro and some to Kyamuyinula in the Mubende district.

The work of the gospel expanded so much so that Pastor Pedersen had to request the assistance of Pastor N K Minani to go to Kazingo and assist in baptizing the new converts. Pedersen also worked with the Uganda Field to ordain some Bakonzo pastors familiar with mountain terrain. The first Mukonzo worker to be ordained to the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was Pastor Charles S. Murwahali in 1966.¹⁶ Samwiri Muhairwa was ordained in 1968,¹⁷ and Benezeri Bageni on July 12, 1969.¹⁸ Pastor Yowasi Mukirania's ordination followed in 1970,¹⁹ Erica Mbusa in 1974,²⁰ and Yokoniya Matte in 1979.²¹

Pedersen also introduced uniforms for the baptismal candidates and for the officiating pastors. He also requested the recruitment of more work force. Such people as Pr Erick Mbusa and Pr Benezeri Tembo Bageni were recruited to the ministry during his time. He then arranged for hymn books and the Kinande New Testaments from Congo and South Africa and sold them to the Bakonzo who previously were using Lutoro Bibles and hymn books. There were no books written in the Lukonzo language.

One evening when Pastor Pedersen returned from his evangelism trips, he found two thugs beating up his wife at his Nyakasura residence. They were robbing her of the money she was collecting from people who received treatment from the small dispensary. This prompted him to buy land on Moledina street in Fort Portal town so that he could temporarily re-locate close to where he could easily access government security services. After he completed construction of the building which had an office and a residence in 1968, he was transferred to Katanga in Congo. Nevertheless, the place he bought and built became the new headquarters of the Rwenzori Mission. Although Pastor Pedersen left the Ruwenzori Mission Station, he continued to send Christian literature to church workers, lay preachers and prospective evangelists. He also sponsored some workers and several children to school. Mature people were sent to seminaries and colleges and they came back with degrees to serve the church.

When Pastor Pedersen left, the East African Union appointed a Canadian Pastor Ben D. Wheeler, who had served as lecturer of theology and public health at Bugema Missionary College to be the Mission Director. He had also served at Ranen Field in Kenya as a gospel minister. He became the first Rwenzori Mission Director to use the house that Pr. Pedersen had built in Fort Portal town. Pastor Ben D. Wheeler supported and promoted the work of evangelism through sponsoring evangelistic campaigns. He translated and circulated tracts. He also promoted and supported the running of Mitandi Primary School. He promoted the selling of Bibles and hymn books in Runyoro-Rutoro, Kinande (Lukonzo) and English at a subsidized price. He also promoted the selling of Ellen G. White books at an affordable price. He emphasized healthful living and eating. Pastor Wheeler became the last missionary to serve as director of the Ruwenzori Mission Station.

In November/December 1970 Pastor Diphase Idude Isabirye was appointed to replace Ben Wheeler as a Mission Director of Ruwenzori Mission Station as well as Uganda Field Publishing Director. Pastor Isabirye served for three years, then was transferred to Uganda Field as an Executive Director in the place of President Robert (Bob) Carter in 1973, who had become a field president in the place of Ben D. Wheeler.

When Pastor D. Isabirye left in 1973 Pastor George William Kasozi-Tamale was appointed to serve as a Ruwenzori Mission Station Director. He promoted the work of education and evangelism. He sensitized the people of Ruwenzori Mission and showed them how they were due for a fully-fledged Field. He also gave them suggestions of how they can acquire a field status. Pastor Kasozi-Tamale served as Director of the Mission Station up to 1981.

Organizational History of Rwenzori Field

Western Uganda Field and Rwenzori Field. In 1982 Bakonzo and Batoro church members came together to request for the upgrade of Ruwenzori Mission Station to a field status. The request was sent to the Eastern Africa Division through East Africa Union where Uganda belonged at the time. The Bakonzo who are the mountain dwellers formed 70% of the church membership at that time and almost the same percentage of the pastors and evangelists, also requested that the headquarters of the field be established in Kasese town where they were more secure and free. They also said it was more cosmopolitan in nature by housing people of several ethnic groups as it was closer to Kilembe Mines, Kasese air-strip, a railway terminal, and Queen Elizabeth Game Park. The then East African Union President promised that the authority of deciding where the seat of the Field would be located resided in the Field Session, representing the whole constituency, which was to be held at the inauguration of the new organization. In 1981, Pastor G. W. Kasozi-Tamale who had been the Mission Station Director was transferred to Uganda Field at Kireka and Pastor C. S. Aliddeki was taken to the Ruwenzori Mission Station in preparation for the new Western Uganda Field.

In December 1982, the first session of the field was held at Kihemo SDA Church in Fort Portal, under the chairmanship of the President of the East African Union, Pastor D. K. Bazarra. In attendance also was the Union Secretary-Treasurer, Pastor Cantrell. Pastor C. S. Aliddeki was inaugurated as the first President of the new field and Mr. Henry Kalule as its Secretary-Treasurer. The agenda of where the headquarters would be located was not tabled until during the closing remarks when two of the delegates, namely Mr. Yowasi Lombo from Karugutu and Mr. Hezron Nziabake Kalenzi from Mitandi raised a question to the same. The question was received with applause from the audience but with cold feet from the administration. The two were told that the question of the location of the headquarters was not an issue of discussion any more. "The field will be housed in Fort Portal." The two wished to know where that decision was made but received no answer. The majority of the members present were not satisfied with the response and left with many questions in their minds about whether the decision made by the leaders was democratic and supported by church policy.²²

On December 1, 1983 with Pastor Christian Aliddeki as president, representatives of the church members and pastors all over the Ruwenzori Mountains met at Kitswamba SDA Church and resolved to petition the East African Union, Nairobi, Kenya and the Eastern Africa Division in Harare, Zimbabwe to reconsider the decision of the leaders which the members from the mountains considered undemocratic. Mr. Masereka Mutiba was appointed chairman of the redress, Mr. Yona Balyage was appointed vice-chairman and Mr. Nahshon Bwambale Magezi was appointed as the secretary to the same. Twenty-one other members were chosen to work with the team. Mr. Yohana Sunday Muhindo was requested to post the request with a speed mail to the East African Union leaders with copies to the leadership of Western Uganda Field in Fort Portal and Eastern Africa Division in Harare, Zimbabwe.²³

After a long time of dialogue, the Eastern Africa Division year end Executive Committee meeting of 1986, under the chairmanship of Pastor Bekele Heye, delegated Pastor Fredrick Wangai, president of East African Union, Pastor Shadrack Ong'ondo Omulo, secretary, and Mr. Livingstone Sebunya, treasurer, to supervise a mini-session where church workers and delegates from organized churches in the entire Western Uganda Field would democratically cast their votes to decide where the headquarters of the Western Uganda Field would be located. Ishaka hospital was chosen to host the meeting which was eventually held in December 1986. The choice was to be between Fort Portal and Kasese towns only. The delegates who were over 200 in number cast their votes and 75% of the delegates voted for Kasese town and 25% cast their votes for Fort Portal as the seat of Western Uganda Field. The Division president ordered that the wish of the majority be followed and implemented without delay.²⁴

Soon after the Ishaka meeting, the first Uganda Union Mission session was held at Bugema Adventist College. Pastor C. S. Aliddeki who was the Western Uganda Field president was appointed to serve as departmental director at the union and so he had to leave the field. Pastor D. I. Isabirye was appointed to replace Pr. Aliddeki as the president of the Western Uganda Field with headquarters in Kasese. But he was reluctant to move the headquarters of the field from Fort Portal to Kasese. In July 1987 Pastor D. I. Isabirye was appointed to the office of the Executive Secretary of Uganda Union and Pastor Zephaniah Mukirane became the president of Western Uganda Field with Pastor Joseph Twesigye as his secretary and Pastor Onesmus Karemire as the treasurer. Under the new leadership of Pastor Mukirane, the Headquarters of Western Uganda Field were moved from Fort Portal to Kasese. But the church members from Toro part of the field who had voted for the headquarters to remain in Fort Portal refused to report to the Kasese headquarters and the union allowed them to form a new field which retained the old name of Western Uganda Field and the field with headquarters in Kasese was changed to Southwestern Uganda Field. Western Uganda Field covered Toro and Bunyoro kingdoms, while Southwestern Uganda Field covered the Ruwenzori Mountains, and the territories of Ankole and Kigezi bordering with Rwanda.²⁵

In 1995 Southwestern Uganda Field recommended to the Union that the southern part of the field be organized as a mission station in preparation for an autonomous field, with headquarters in Mbarara. In 2012 Southwestern Uganda Field was reorganized into two fields. Mbarara Station became Southwestern Uganda Field covering the territories of Ankole and Kigezi with headquarters in Mbarara town and the mountain area of the field became Rwenzori Field covering the Rwenzori Mountains with headquarters in Kasese town.²⁶

List of Presidents

Pastor Ezekiel Mutwanga has been the president of Rwenzori Field since it was organized in 2012. He became president in 2011. But there were leaders who were in charge of the Southwestern Uganda Field before it was reorganized into two fields. These included Pastor Zephaniah Mukirane (1987-1990), Pastor Benezeri Thembo Bageni (1991-1993), Pastor Yowasi K. Mukirania (1994-1997), Pastor John B. Kule (1997-2001), and Pastor Daniel Maate (2002-2010).

SOURCES

Executive Secretary's Statistical Report, Rwenzori Field, 3rd Quarter, 2019.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954-1980.

Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2016. The National Population and Housing Census 2014 – Main Report, Kampala, Uganda.

NOTES

1. The words 'Ruwendzori' and 'Rwendzori' refer to the same mountain ranges covering the Western part of Uganda and the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ruwendzori was the name given to the Mountain by the European explorer H.M. Stanley in 1890. The term Rwendzori is the way the local people pronounce the word. The local people also called the Mountain 'Rwendzururu' meaning the land covered with snow. Mt. Rwendzori is the third tallest Mountain (5,109 meters or 16,762 Ft.) in Africa after Kilimanjaro with the height of 5,895 meters (19,340 Ft.) and Kenya 5119 meters (17,057 Ft.) above the sea level.
2. Rwenzori Field Executive Secretary's Statistical Report, 3rd Quarter, 2019
3. Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2016, The National Population and Housing Census 2014 – Main Report, Kampala, Uganda
4. Johnson Masereka, interview with the author, Kireka, April 7, 2019
5. Yereimiya Kwirabusa, interview with Erisa Rukara, co-author, Mitandi, March 15, 2019

6. Johnson Masereka, interview with the author, Kireka, April 7, 2019.
7. Paul Kibwana, interview with author, Kasese Municipality, October 20, 2019.
8. Yosiya Mugamba, telephone interview with author, June 19, 2019.
9. Ibid.
10. Yowasi Bukombi, interview with author, Western Uganda Field Office in Fort Portal, March 11, 2019.
11. Yofesi Mutunzi, telephone interview with author, March 10, 2019.
12. SDA Yearbook, 1954.
13. Yowasi Mukirania, interview with the author, Kasese Better Living Center, February 17, 2019.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Paul Kibwana, telephone interview with the author, November 28, 2019. According to the interviewee, Pr. Charles Mulwahali was ordained in 1966. Elder Kibwana said that he was teaching at Ruhanga in 1966 but was transferred to Mitandi in 1967. He says Pr Mulwahali had been ordained the year before his arrival at Mitandi.
17. Benezeri Bageni, interview with the author, Kasese, November 12, 2019. Pr. Bageni says Pr. Samwiri Muhairwa was ordained at Najjanankumbi in 1968 making him the second Mukonzo to be ordained to the SDA Church Ministry.
18. Ibid.
19. "Rwenzori Mission Station" *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971).
20. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1975).
21. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971).
22. Yowasi Lombo, interview with the, Kasese Better Living Center on 26th October, 2019. Mr. Yowasi Lombo was one of the delegates at the said meeting.
23. Yona Balyage, who was vice chairman of the group and a co-author of this article.

24. Ezekiel Mutwanga, interview with author, July 11, 2019 at the field office in Kasese. Pr. Ezekiel Mutwanga was the President of South Western Uganda Field at the time.

25. Nathaniel Walemba who was the division executive secretary then and a co-author of this article.

26. Ibid.

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