

Robinson, Christopher (1880–1963)

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Christopher Robison was a British-born Seventh-day Adventist pioneer in southern Africa.

Early Life

Christopher Robison was born in Haversham, England, on September 20, 1880. He came to Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1899, where his relatives were working as farmers. It was at the time of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1901) between the English and the Dutch, which ended with the defeat of the Dutch (or Boers) and England's assumption of the colonial administration of South Africa. Robison attended Seventh-day Adventist meetings conducted by H. J. Edmed and was baptized in 1902.¹ For the next three years he sold Adventist publications as a literature evangelist.²

Education and Ministry

In 1906, Robison decided to dedicate his life to mission service. This decision prompted him to go to Cape Town, where he took a nursing course at the Cape Sanitarium to become a medical missionary. During the fourth session of the South African Union Conference, held at Claremont, Cape Town, from December 24 to January 3, 1909, plans were laid for aggressive work. It was voted to send three additional workers to the Barotseland Mission in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia): Brother and Sister J. R. Campbell and Christopher Robison.³ In March 1909, Robison went to join Elder W. H. Anderson, whose wife had passed away the year before leaving him alone at Rusangu Mission.⁴ J. R. Campbell and his family arrived later in June 1909.⁵

By 1910, the Rusangu Mission school had an enrollment of seventy-two, in addition to those who were being taught in the seven out-stations (village schools). When not teaching the teachers were busy plowing; in 1910 they had one hundred and seventy-five acres under cultivation.⁶ After touring the out-schools, Robison returned to Barotseland Mission on October 2, 1910, looking "fairer and fatter in flesh" than when he started out. He described the region as "a land as the land of milk and honey, but full of fever as well."⁷

While serving at Rusangu, Robison had an encounter with a lion. As he turned into some tall grass to drink water from a spring, his native carriers had fallen behind, leaving him without protection. When they saw the lion, they climbed up into trees while Robison returned from quenching his thirst singing a song of praise. He met the lion squarely in his path, but the singing seemed to frighten the animal and it turned out of the path, enabling Robison to pass safely.⁸ Robison remained at Rusangu Mission until the end of 1911.⁹ While working at Rusangu Mission, he



Chris Robison and his wife.
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pioneered the work along the Kafue River where, by 1911, he had planted three out-schools.¹⁰

After gaining experience at Rusangu, Robinson was transferred to Malawi in 1912. There he replaced J. C. Rogers who went on furlough. The Seventh-day Adventist Church had bought the Plainfield Mission school from Seventh Day Baptists, and the Robinsons turned it into a sanitarium. It was later renamed Malamulo Hospital in 1925 after the arrival of Dr. C. F. Birkenstock. Robinson built a dispensary, which was run with the help of Sister Fourie. In March 1912, Robinson and S. M. Konigsmacher travelled into Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) in search of a mission station. The trip was made using donkeys, which were much less expensive than traveling by *machila* (African hammock). They selected a good site that was about one hundred miles from the Matandani Mission Station and two hundred miles from Malamulo Mission. They hoped to start work there in 1913.¹¹

The work at Malamulo proved to be more challenging for Robinson than that at Rusangu, where the railway line passed at the western border of the mission farm. Malamulo did not have a railway line nearby, and the road network was bad. By 1914, W. B. White reported,

Brother Robinson and his co-workers are labouring hard to make it a success, and the Lord is blessing their efforts. They greatly feel the need for more literature in the vernacular and steps are being taken to provide literature for that field.¹²

While on his furlough in South Africa, Robinson met Tersha Fourie Page who had also received nursing training at the Plumstead (Cape) Sanitarium. They married and returned to Malawi together in 1916 as missionaries.¹³

By 1919, in spite of the effects of the First World War, baptized membership at Malamulo had grown to 512, which was larger than the membership in all the other mission stations in northern and southern Rhodesia combined.¹⁴ In that same year (1919), Malamulo received its first visit from a General Conference representative when E. E. Andrews came. Robinson was among those who greeted him.¹⁵ By November of that year, the Robinsons were on furlough, while G. A. Ellingworth took charge of the mission.

In 1920, Robinson was sent to Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) where he and G. Willmore secured from the government a grant of 1,000 acres of land to open Songa Mission.¹⁶ The site for the mission, situated on the Lulwelwe River, had been selected by W. E. Straw (superintendent of the Zambesi Union Mission) and F. R. Stockil (superintendent of Rusangu Mission) in 1919. With Robinson in charge of the mission, G. Willmore served as his assistant.¹⁷ The decision to send Robinson to Congo reduced the workforce in Rhodesia; however, it enabled the opening of a new mission in Central Africa. The Congo had a population of fifteen million people in 1922 when Robinson was in charge of the work there.¹⁸ For three years, he lived among the Africans as one of them, working under very primitive conditions and a poor diet, which apparently broke his health. The team sent to find him removed him and took him back to the Cape where he recovered completely.

Robinson was transferred to the Inyazura Mission in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1923 where he became director of the school, in addition to the three years (1932-1935) he served as the Southern Rhodesia Mission field superintendent. Robinson was director of the Inyazura Mission school until 1948.¹⁹ Since the establishment of the school, it had been difficult to establish out-schools in the reserves. Under Robinson's leadership, by 1925 nine out-schools were running, and three or four more were expected to be added.²⁰

Through Robinson's effort, an orphan boy named Onias Dalison Muza, who had become a boxer, was baptized in the Nyazura Mission. Robinson later trained him in Sabbath School work. As superintendent of the Nyazura Mission, Robinson mentored many young people. Among them Onias D. Muza, Benjamin Gurure, Sidney Janda, and Harry Dumba were sent to Solusi Mission to take up studies for a Junior Certificate, which was affiliated with a school in Cape Town. Onias Muza and Harry Dumba were further recommended to train as pastors at Solusi College. In 1964, Muza became the first president of the Mashonaland Field, after the re-organization of the Southern Rhodesia Mission Field. The headquarters for the Mashonaland Mission Field was at the Nyazura Mission.

Perhaps one of Robinson's most outstanding and effective new measures was the establishment of annual camp meetings. They drew thousands and were responsible for a significantly large number of converts. His wife, Tersha, also started African women's camp meetings in October 1944. Such techniques also helped to consolidate the missions as they expanded into more and more remote areas. In addition to camp meetings, Robinson also introduced teachers' meetings. Among his other accomplishments, careful financial management prevented the mission from being acquired by white commercial farmers. Thus, he ensured the property would host camp meetings and youth camps until the mid-1980s.²¹

The General Conference recognized Tersha Robinson for her hospitality.

The growing impact of evangelism in Nyazura during this era was a result, in part, of the innovative methods of the Robinsons. Christopher Robinson introduced a number of innovations, which were copied in other fields. Among his innovations were institutes for African out-school teachers, the organization of Africans into young people's societies, and the development of work opportunities for women and girls.²² In 1928, the Robinsons had to leave for the Cape on furlough as Tersha Robinson's health had been weakened by fevers. A four-month break was intended to let them recover their intense labor at Nyazura.²³

Retirement and Contributions

After serving for twenty-five years at Inyazura Mission School, Christopher Robinson retired. He returned to Cape Town where he purchased his retirement home, Forfar, below Table Mountain. From here, he entertained many missionaries passing through the Cape on their way inland. While retired, he took deep interest in the smaller churches. Robinson died on November 16, 1963. He was survived by his wife, Tersha, with whom he spent forty years serving the Lord in the southern African countries. Following a funeral service conducted by Pastor Albert C. Le Butt, he was laid to rest in Helderberg Cemetery next to the grave of their only child, who died at the age of 18.²⁴

Robinson's groundbreaking efforts in Nyazura created a strong foundation for the work of the Adventist Church in this region. He established a Missionary Volunteer school, which provided an orientation for all missionaries entering Africa. He introduced teachers' meetings and camp meetings at the Inyazura Mission, and started church choirs—the latter inspired by his wife. He also made Inyazura a self-sustaining mission through his sacrifice. The mission grew maize and beans in fields ploughed with oxen. Cows raised on campus provided butter and cream to feed the students

Robinson was also responsible for constructing a water supply from the hills for irrigating crops.²⁵

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