

Onyango, Joseph Shem (1936–2010)

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Joseph Shem Onyango was a church pioneer, pastor, preacher, evangelist, and marriage counselor.

Early Life

Joseph Shem Onyango, the only child of his mother, Paulina, was born June 26, 1936, at Utegi, in Mara North Western region of Tanzania.¹ His father, Jacob Shem, owned lots of cattle and had 15 wives and 68 children. Sadly though, Onyango's mother died when he was only five years old at Utegi, where Joseph spent much of his childhood.²

Onyango, as was Joseph's childhood name, was educated up to grade four at a Catholic primary school at Kowak in Mara. Next, he attended middle school at Kibumaye Adventist Mission School from 1949 until 1953, after which he attended Bugema Adventist Secondary School in Uganda from 1953 to 1956. He was considered relatively well educated for his time and in his area.³

Conversion and Marriage

Onyango grew up to be a businessman who dealt with hauling fish in Musoma, Mara region headquarters.⁴ There he met and fell in love with Rhoda Adhiambo whose father was a lawyer. Onyango proposed to Rhoda, who agreed to marry him on the condition that he agreed to be baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist.⁵ Rhoda introduced Onyango to her church pastor in Musoma, Pastor Mispereth Rutolyo, who encouraged the young man to join the baptismal class. Onyango was baptized and then married Rhoda in June 1956 in Musoma.⁶

Education

Having witnessed the ability and commitment of her husband, Rhoda encouraged Onyango to study for the ministry. Again, it was Pastor Rutolyo who officially recommended Onyango to the ministerial leadership of the East Nyanza Field. Consequently, Onyango was sponsored to attend Bugema Missionary College from 1962 to 1964, and he there earned his ministerial diploma.⁷

Onyango and Rhoda were blessed with five children: Grace, Maxwell, Tabu, Paul, and Baraka. Their son, Maxwell, who was the Tanzania Union associate treasurer, died in a vehicle accident in 1993.⁸

Ministry

Pastor Joseph Shem Onyango was called to be a frontline pastor at Kirumba in the city of Mwanza in 1965 where he was the first indigenous African pastor for that municipal church.⁹ After serving for five years, he was asked to join the pioneering work at Maswa in Shinyanga region in 1970.

Pastor Robinson, the Tanzanian Union mission president, was impressed with Onyango's ministry, and only six months after he had started working in Maswa in 1970, Elder Robinson initiated a call to move Onyango to the city of Dar-es-Salaam. There he pastored Magomeni SDA Church, the first and only church in the city. While there, Pastor Onyango organized the Temeke SDA Church, Kibaha SDA Church, and the University Church branch.¹⁰

In 1975 Pastor Onyango moved to Mbeya to open the work there. A year later he moved to Lindi where he stayed for one and a half years and organized a church there.¹¹

In 1976 Pastor Onyango was called to be one of the Tanzania Union group of five pastor-evangelists who were chosen from the five fields of the union to make up a frontline team of evangelists who for six years went from one major city to the next in the whole of Tanzania conducting major evangelistic series of not less than five weeks each.¹²

During the course of the evangelistic thrusts in which Pastor Onyango was part, hundreds of souls were won to Christ. He was next moved to Morogoro, the headquarters for the Tanzania General Field. Here he became a departmental director for Sabbath School and church ministries, which included family ministries and other ministries. He did this from 1977 until 2000.¹³

Pastor Onyango proved to be a competent marriage counsellor, and he officiated at more than 700 marriages, according to his own count, by the time of his retirement. He never forgot the first marriage at which he officiated on April 6, 1969. The young man's name was David, and he later became the Tanzanian president's personal physician and finally a government minister. Pastor Onyango produced more than ten DVDs on "Marriage Policies" which became very popular in the country in the 1990s, and he wrote two books on married life which are still produced by the nearby press.¹⁴

Two years before his retirement, Pastor Onyango accepted a call to be a frontline pastor of the church in the city of Morogoro, which was his final place of service.¹⁵

Later Life

Pastor Joseph Shem Onyango officially retired in February 2003, but he remained active in serving his Lord as opportunities arose.¹⁶ After having worked very hard on solving a church dispute at a church more than 100 kilometers from his Morogoro home, he was returning to that church for a Thanksgiving Family Life Week program when he was hit by a motorcyclist on September 17, 2010. His funeral was attended by many people from the city and beyond. The huge attendance was a strong testimony to his impact on society, and it will not be easily forgotten in that part of the world.

Pastor Joseph Shem Onyango will be remembered for his captivating preaching and his marriage presentations which he called *sera za ndoa* (marriage policies).

SOURCES

“Joseph Shem Onyango.” East Central Tanzania Conference Service Records. East Central Tanzania Conference archives, Morogoro, Tanzania.

NOTES

1. Paul Joseph Onyango, telephone interview by author, February 18, 2020, Reading, England.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Elisha A. Okeyo, telephone interview by author, February 19, 2020, Arusha, Tanzania.
5. Paul Joseph Onyango, telephone interview by author, February 19, 2020, Reading, England.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Pastor Elisha A. Okeyo, telephone interview by author, February 20, 2020, Arusha, Tanzania.
10. Paulo Joseph Onyango, telephone interview by author, February 19, 2020, Reading, England.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Pastor Joshua Malongo, telephone interview by author, February 19, 2020.

16. "Joseph Shem Onyango," East Central Tanzania Conference Service Records.

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