

Southern Conference

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Southern Conference was a subsidiary church administrative unit in the Southern Africa Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists from 1927 to 1997.

Territory and Statistics

The Southern Conference was responsible for the mission work among the Black South Africans in the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces. The earliest Black churches in the Northern Cape were cared for by the Trans-Orange Conference. In the year that it became defunct (1997), the Southern Conference had 121 churches with 15,440 members out of a population of 7,540,913. Its headquarters was located along N. U. 1, 3108, Mdantsane, East London, Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.¹

Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory

Despite the fact that the three major racial groups of South Africa (Black, Colored, and White) had their differences in the past history, they also had many things in common. One of the things they had in common was that their origins were all traced to the diamond fields in Kimberley of the Cape Colony. William Hunt was a gold miner from Nevada in the United States of America. He settled in Kimberley in 1871 shortly after the discovery of rich mineral fields. Here he met George van Druten and Pieter Wessels who both discovered the biblical Sabbath through divinely ordained circumstances.

Pieter Wessels became the driving force in spreading the Adventist message to the best of his understanding in Kimberley. Wessels, along with Hunt and van Druten, sent a letter to Battle Creek where the General Conference headquarters were located requesting a minister to come to South Africa to baptize them and to give further instruction in the truth. The first missionaries arrived in Cape Town in 1887. These missionaries included the pastoral families of D. A. Robinson and C. L. Boyd, along with two colporteurs, R. S. Anthony and George Burleigh, and one Bible instructor Corrie Mace. Pastor C. L. Boyd and colporteur George Burleigh traveled to Kimberley with Pieter Wessels who received them at the harbor in Cape Town. Here they baptized and established the first Seventh-day Adventist Church on the continent of Africa at Beaconsfield in 1887. D. A. Robinson, R. S. Anthony, and Corrie Mace remained in Cape Town to commence the work in this region.

It was here in Kimberley where Richard Moko, the first Black South African, accepted the Adventist message.² Richard Moko was a descendant of a long line of AmaXhosa chiefs and was born in a village near Grahamstown, South Africa, in 1850.³ Richard Moko was a school teacher and was considered highly educated; and he was well versed in isiXhosa, Dutch, and English.

When a business venture failed, Moko decided to go to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). At that time the railway lines only went as far as Johannesburg. Consequently, Moko was required to complete the rest of his journey by foot.⁴ Providence instructed him to turn around and go to Cape Town instead. When Moko arrived in Cape Town, he was met by a kind stranger, Elder Haupt, who took him home to freshen up and invited him to have a meal alongside Elders Smailes, Hyatt, Burton, and George W. Shone, who later became Moko's missionary associate⁵. They met with Moko regularly and held Bible studies with him.

Moko then went to Kimberley along with his mentors and attended a series of meetings that were happening there in an attempt to revive the church in that area. These meetings were conducted by Stephen H. Haskell from the General Conference. It was here, upon further instruction through Fred Reed, where Moko embraced the Adventist message and was baptized in 1895. Eager to share his newly found faith among his own people, Moko translated the first isiXhosa tract and became a colporteur.⁶

In 1897 Richard Moko was granted ministerial license to preach. He first began working around Kimberley, and the following year, in 1898, he returned to his place of origin with George W. Shone to start the work in the eastern part of the Cape Colony (present day Eastern Cape Province in South Africa). They first settled in King William's Town and strategically continued to work throughout the eastern territory of the Cape Colony. Moko resided not far from there in Debe Neck where he began preaching to his own community. His own family and the Mdzoyi family became the very firstfruits of his labor.⁷ From here their mission focus shifted to East London.

The South African Conference requested funds from the General Conference Foreign Mission Board in order to establish mission work among the Xhosa people. This request was not acceded to, but when the South African Union Conference was organized in 1902, they granted £100, which was used to purchase a "gospel wagon" to be used by Moko and Shone as they traveled throughout the Eastern Cape.⁸

Moko was not always received in a friendly manner, especially since his preaching stressed that Saturday was blessed and hallowed as God's Sabbath day. Despite the opposition he faced in many ways, Moko faithfully labored on. After establishing a church group in East London, he moved on to Peddie in 1904⁹ and continued on donkey cart to conduct meetings in the nearby villages, and "many villagers became Adventists."¹⁰

As they traveled throughout the Eastern Cape, they were also searching for suitable land on which to establish a mission station for the Xhosa people. In 1908 when Charles Sparrow heard that they were searching for land, he offered 520 acres of land for the purpose of setting up a mission station.¹¹ The farm was located approximately forty kilometers from Grahamstown. The mission station that started here was called Maranatha Mission. Maranatha Mission School opened in 1909 and enrolled 60 learners, and Pastor W. S. Hyatt became its first

director. Miss A. V. Sutherland was sent from Cape Town to head the school, and she was assisted by African teachers whose names are still unknown.¹² By 1911 the Maranatha Mission baptized 27 members and organized the first congregation named Maranatha Church at the mission station.¹³ The Maranatha Mission was relocated to Butterworth in 1917 and renamed Bethel Mission.

Soon after the Maranatha Mission was established, Adventist church members began spreading their message in Grahamstown. One strategy used by the earliest workers was to hang picture rolls on street corners that would attract crowds to their meetings. A certain Mr. A. T. Magalela became converted to the Adventist message while interpreting for Pastors Pacheder and Sparrow, who also held meetings in the Peddie area. When Magelela moved to Queenstown, his most effective tool for drawing crowds was to display a prophetic chart that illustrated the history of the world and its end.¹⁴ Magalela requested to hang the chart outside the wall of a certain Mr. Madikane's house. As Magalela would preach and teach the Word, his wife, Legina, and other converts would pretend to be passersby who were listening to the messages being preached on the other side of the wall. This would attract crowds of interested listeners with many questions. The first church in this area was organized not far from there.

The work began in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha) through converts from nearby towns such as Peddie who had come to reside in Gqeberha for employment purposes. When converts who knew each other from the same home area met each other in Gqeberha, they decided to gather together for Sabbath worship. The first Black Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Gqeberha metropolitan started in Korsten, along 31 Elkana Street, at the residence of the Mdlulwa family.¹⁵ This church later moved into a public building in an area known as Kwa-Baker and later settled in New Brighten when Korsten was declared a "Whites only" area by the South African Apartheid nationalist government led by the National Party (NP).

The Adventist message reached the Black people of the Western Cape also through the faithful labors of Pastor Richard Moko. When Richard Moko was in Port Elizabeth at one time, he "met a Wesleyan evangelist by the name of William W. Olifan with whom he shared the Sabbath truth."¹⁶ Olifan studied the Bible with special reference to the Sabbath and continued to interact with Seventh-day Adventist believers. He eventually left the Methodist Church and became a Seventh Day Baptist preacher. When he was assigned to George, he became convinced of the Sabbath truth and started preaching the three angels' messages. Here he gained a small company of believers. When he was dismissed from his service in the Seventh Day Baptist Church, he moved to Cape Town.

In Cape Town he met Pastor Moko again, and they both became instrumental in planting churches in Cape Town and in George. Their combined efforts saw a church being formed in Ndabeni, formerly a township for Black people in Cape Town. When Blacks were later evicted from Ndabeni when the area was declared a "Whites only" area, they were forced to settle in Langa. "Langa Church became the mother of all African churches in the Cape Peninsula and its surroundings."¹⁷

Sabbath keeping among Black South Africans in George died shortly after Olifan's departure and was revived only years later when the Tshafu family settled in Marais Park.¹⁸ Their strategy was to invite the children in the neighborhood to teach them Bible verses and songs. Later a colporteur came to stay with the Tshafu family, who began selling his books in the neighborhood. Catherine Xipu, who also bought a book from him, became the first Adventist convert in George.¹⁹ This small group of believers in George continued with door-to-door distribution of literature and held campaigns. At these campaigns the singing and music attracted crowds of interested listeners.

Organizational History

The first organization that existed for Black South Africans dates back to 1908. Pastors Richard Moko and George W. Shone were preaching throughout the Eastern Cape with the "gospel wagon" that they purchased with funds received from the South African Union Conference. Under the supervision of the Cape Colony Conference, Moko and Shone, along with I. B. Burton, were assigned to find suitable land on which to establish the first mission station that would take forward the work among Black South Africans.

As already mentioned above, they searched long for land until their search proved unsuccessful. It was then when Charles Sparrow, who also had a particular interest in the work among the Black South Africans, entered into a lease agreement with the church in which the church could use 520 acres of land on his farm not far from Grahamstown for establishing a mission station named Maranatha Mission but was known to the natives as Qhamana.²⁰ Maranatha Mission therefore became the first Seventh-day Adventist institution established to cater for the needs of Black South Africans.

In 1916 British colonial rule drove Black Africans further eastward, causing the church to sell their property back to Charles Sparrow. The farm was sold for £1,650, and the proceeds were used "to purchase another piece of land in Butterworth in Transkei" where the mission station and the school were moved. The farm in Butterworth was purchased for £1,100 and had a big stone on the premises. The name was given Bethel Mission reminiscent of Jacob's graphic dream where he slept with a stone under his head and named the place Bethel (Genesis 28). The locals referred to the Bethel Mission Station as Kwa-Sirayeli "because the occupants of the land kept God's Sabbath holy and kept His ordinances and became therefore spiritual Israel."²¹

In 1924, financial difficulties faced by the church in South Africa led to the self-supporting conferences incorporating the Black Mission Stations in their territories into their administrations. Thus, the Bethel Mission continued as a training school for Black learners and students, though the administration of the churches became governed by the Cape Conference. Three years later, in 1927, the leaders of the South African Union Conference felt that the work should be organized along racial lines in an attempt to encourage church growth. Consequently, the work among Black people in the Cape Province was organized into the Kaffirland²² Mission Field. Pastor E. M. Howard was appointed as the first president, and he was succeeded by Pastor J. E. Symons.

Financial strain was again felt by the church in South Africa with the global financial depression of the 1930s. This financial depression caused the General Conference to reduce its appropriation to the Southern African Division by up to 24 percent.²³ In an attempt to mitigate the adverse financial consequences that would have led to retrenchment and missionary work retreat, the Southern African Division Committee resolved to merge the Kaffirland Mission Field with the Transvaal-Delgoa Mission Field in the north of South Africa to form the South African Mission Field, effective from January 1, 1933.

Shortly thereafter appropriations were reduced even further up to 40 percent.²⁴ Consequently, even the two self-supporting conferences had to be merged as a result of the financial constraints brought about by the same crisis. The Cape and Natal-Transvaal Conferences were merged to form the South African Conference. This arrangement only lasted for one term, since leaders realized that it was not an effective strategy for the advancement of the work to have both self-supporting conferences merged as one, as well as to have the mission fields merged. As a result, they decided to reorganize the work in the South African Union Conference to reinstate the conferences and the mission fields in their former states despite the financial difficulty the church faced. Thus, the South African Mission Field was divided into the North Bantu Mission Field (formerly the Transvaal-Delgoa Mission Field) and the South Bantu Mission Field (formerly the Kaffirland Mission Field) with Pastor G. S. Stevenson as its president.

Pastor G. S. Stevenson initiated calls to further divide the territories of the South and North Bantu Fields into smaller mission fields. This division was to be made along ethnic and geographic borders. This sparked debates between the leadership of the union conference and the mission field, which continued from 1941 until 1959 when Stevenson eventually became the union conference president.

In 1959 Stevenson submitted a second memorandum, which recommended that the two Black mission fields be divided into 10 mission fields. His memorandum was accepted with one adjustment—that the two mission fields be divided into nine mission fields instead of ten. The South Bantu Mission Field therefore became divided into the Cape Western, Eastern Province, and Transkeian Fields.

The financial conditions of these mission fields made it impossible for the nine mission fields to survive. The South and North Bantu Mission Fields were already not self-supporting and receiving financial aid from the South African Union Conference. When they were further divided, they became more financially crippled, and three years later, the South African Union Conference Group II Committee, which oversaw the work of the mission fields, decided to reduce the nine mission fields to just five. Thus, in 1963, the Eastern Province and the Transkeian Fields became merged into the Cape Eastern Field.

In 1969 Pastor Tumahole Tsuduku was transferred from the Lesotho Field to the Cape Western Field. The Cape Western Field generally was a stronger field in terms of finances since it included the Cape Town Metropolitan, which has always been one of the economic hubs of South Africa. When Tsuduku arrived in the Cape Western Field, he raised some concerns regarding some financial discrepancies.²⁵ This sparked some controversies that

led to Pastor Tsuduku's being "expelled to the dissatisfaction of some members of the church who decided to withhold their tithes in protest."²⁶

The situation in the Cape Western Field escalated so much so that the Southern Union Conference requested Pastor Z. N. S. Fosi, who was the union conference secretary-treasurer, to go to the Cape Western Field headquarters to reconcile the financial books. Pastor Fosi spent six months in the Cape Western Field until he finally closed their financial books. Soon thereafter the Cape Western Field was dissolved, and the Cape Eastern Field took over all its churches and changed its name to Cape Field in 1970.

As the membership grew and the field became stronger, increasing calls came for organizing the Cape Field into a self-sustained conference. As early as 1971, some members, encouraged by Pastor D. T. Bandla, began to raise their request to be granted conference status though others maintained that the field was not yet financially independent.²⁷ Conference status was finally achieved and granted in 1984, and the Cape Field changed its name to Southern Conference. Pastor Z. N. S. Fosi became its first president.

Shortly after this, South Africa, long having been divided by the atrocious racial segregation during the years of the *Apartheid* regime, began moving toward a new democratic South Africa, in which all its citizens were regarded to be equal. Finally Apartheid came to an end due to internal pressure from its citizens and externally from the many sanctions against South Africa, and these culminated in 1990 when President F. W. De Klerk announced the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela from prison and the unbanning of political parties such as the African National Party (ANC).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa, long having been separated in accordance with the laws that prevailed in South Africa at the time, also resolved to work toward uniting the church. The General Conference joined and facilitated the merging of the two union conferences, which operated parallel to each other in South Africa--South African and Southern Union Conferences. The South African and Southern Union Conferences successfully merged on December 10, 1991, at a joint session held at Helderberg College to form the Southern Africa Union Conference.

There then remained an onus on the local conferences to follow in the footsteps of their parent union conference to merge. At that time three local conferences were operating in the Cape Provinces. These were the Cape Conference, which served the White population, the Good Hope Conference, which served the Colored population, and the Southern Conference, which served the Black population. All three conferences engaged in dialogue through their administrators and an interconference merger committee that was set up to study and facilitate the merging process successfully.

Just before the merging of the two union conferences was implemented, members from the Peninsula District churches of the Southern Conference in Cape Town met at Thembalethu SDA Church in Gugulethu, Cape Town. From this meeting a position statement was drafted and submitted to the district for discussion and adoption.²⁸ The position statement contained 12 principles focusing on achieving racial equity in all church structures

including “working toward a just environment in which all groups have access to opportunities, promote fair treatment of all workers, the elimination of systemic racism in the education system, and the advancement of racial equity in the education system through its structures of governance, employment policies, and practices,”²⁹ to mention a few.

This position statement was also adopted by the Southern Conference executive committee and later by the Southern Union Conference executive committee with a few amendments as their official position. As the merger approached, some of the members of the Southern Conference executive committee began to articulate ambivalence toward the proposed merger. When the merger of the two union conferences was finally achieved in 1991, members from the Southern Conference remained reluctant to proceed with merging the local conferences.³⁰

But the members of the Southern Conference, who were proponents of the merging of the local conferences were dissatisfied with this reluctance that seemed then evident in the conference, requested their membership to be transferred to the Good Hope Conference, which was determined to integrate with the Southern and Cape Conferences. Elder Matthew Bediako, then vice-president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, met with officers of the Southern Africa Union Conference and the Southern and Good Hope Conferences along with the concerned members of the Southern Conference who wanted to transfer their membership to the Good Hope Conference.³¹

Their meeting took place in Kayamandi, in Stellenbosch, and the outcomes of the meeting required the local church officers to facilitate the transfers of membership from the Southern Conference to the Good Hope Conference as requested. The Southern and Good Hope Conferences were also encouraged to continue their deliberations toward achieving structural unity through the proposed merger.

At the Cape Conference business session held in 1995, the 75 percent majority vote that was required by its constitution to merge with its sister conferences, was not achieved and therefore they pulled out of the merging dialogue. The Southern Conference continued to dialogue with the Good Hope Conference until they were finally merged to form the Southern Hope Conference at a joint session held in Port Elizabeth on September 13, 1997. This brought the existence of the Southern Conference to an end.

List of Presidents

Kaffirland Mission Field: E. M. Howard (1927–1931); J. E. Symons (1931–1932).

South African Mission Field: J. R. Campbell (1933–1936).

South Bantu Field: G. S. Stevenson (1936–1942); J. N. De Beer (1942–1951); I. E. Shultz (1951–1956); E. A. Buckley (1956–1958); E. W. Bradbury (1958–1960).

Eastern Province Field: W. M. Sojola (1961–1963).

Transkeian Field: C. B. Ntshangase (1961–1963).

Cape Eastern Field: W. M. Sojola (1963–1970).

Cape Western Field: D. D. Mankayi (1961–1967); W. M. Tshefu (1967–1969); Z. N. S. Fosi (1969–1970).

Cape Field: W. M. Sojola (1970–1971); M. M. Myendeki (1971–1974); C. B. Ntshangase (1974–1979); J. S. Khumalo (1979–1981); Z. N. S. Fosi (1981–1984).

Southern Conference: Z. N. S. Fosi (1984–1991); O. T. Mngqibisa (1991–1996); M. M. Sojola (1996–1997).

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NOTES

1. "Southern Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 375.

2. Virgil E. Robinson, *Third Angel Over Africa* (Unpublished Manuscript), 124.

3. Clifford Nhlapo, *Tears of the Black Pulpit* (Wandsbeck, South Africa: Reach Publishers, 2010), 13.

4. Mxolisi Michael Sokupa, "Documented Memories of Richard Moko's Life and Contribution: A Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Reflection," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 41, no. 3 (2015): 173.
5. Hlanga Mafani, *From Genesis to Germination* (Self-published by Hlanga Mafani, 2011), 23.
6. Nhlapo, *Tears*, 13.
7. Mafani, *Genesis to Germination*, 56.
8. L. Francois Swanepoel, "The Origin and Early History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa, 1886 – 1920," (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1972), 125.
9. Mafani, *Genesis to Germination*, 58.
10. Ibid.
11. Sokupa, "Documented Memories of Richard Moko," 174.
12. Mafani, *Genesis to Germination*, 46.
13. Swanepoel, "Origin and Early History," 125.
14. Mafani, *Genesis to Germination*, 59.
15. Ibid., 60.
16. Passmore Hachalinga, *Echoes from Table Mountain: Experiences of the Seventh-day Adventist Pioneers in the Cape – Adventism's Gateway into Southern Africa* (Somerset West, South Africa: Bevan Litho Publishers, 2021), 75.
17. Ibid., 78.
18. Mafani, *Genesis to Germination*, 70.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 46.
21. Ibid., 47.
22. Kaffirland was the colloquial name given to the territories that Black South Africans were restricted to by British Colonial rule and later the *Apartheid* regime. While the name was commonly used among the White leaders of the church at the time, today the name has been

criminalized and it is therefore derogatory and illegal to refer to Black persons as Kaffirs.

23. J. F. Wright, "A Further Cut in Appropriations and Important Division Committee Actions," *Southern African Division Outlook*, June 1, 1932, 1.

24. N. C. Wilson, "Cape and Natal-Transvaal Conference Amalgamated," *Southern African Division Outlook*, May 15, 1933, 6.

25. Mafani, *Genesis to Germination*, 132.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 133.

28. Bulumko V. Msengana, email sent to Sithembile Hachalinga, September 17, 2021.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

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