

Middle East Union Mission

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Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

The Middle East Union Mission was operational in two separate periods from 1941-1951 and again from 1970-2011.

Middle East Union Mission (1941-1951)

The Middle East Union Mission was a unit of church organization attached to the General Conference as part of the General Conference Missions Division.¹ It was initially assigned the territories of Arabia, Cyprus, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Somaliland, Syria, Transjordan, and Turkey; comprising the missions of Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Palestine-Transjordan, and Egypt. There were 32 churches, 1,384 members, and a population of 79,969,000.² The administrative office was located at 10 Av. Sidi-Garber Ramleh, Alexandria, Egypt. In 1947, the office was moved to Imm. Elias Helou, Sioufi, Achrafiya, Beirut, Lebanon. PO Box 1011, Beirut.³

Organizational History

The Middle East Union Mission grew out of the Arabic Union Mission, which developed out of the earlier Oriental Union Mission, both unions being parts of the Central European Division. Formed in 1927, the Arabic Union Mission was comprised of three missions – the Egyptian, Syrian, and Mesopotamian – including most of the territory known today as the Middle East. The Central European Division with its headquarters in Berlin had been able to support its mission territories and missionaries financially, but under the Hitler regime, things were



Middle East Union office.

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changed,⁴ and the German church was no longer allowed to send mission funds abroad. In 1941, therefore, several mission territories temporarily had to be supported directly from the General Conference – among them the territories in the Middle East.⁵ A new Middle East Union Mission directly attached to the General Conference was formed including other territories outside the Arabic Union Mission like Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland, Iran, and Turkey.⁶

However, in 1945, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland left the Middle East Union Mission and were reorganized into the Ethiopian Union Mission with headquarters in Addis Ababa.⁷ The territory of the Middle East Union Mission was instead expanded to include Northern Sudan (1945),⁸ Libya, and Kuwait (1948).⁹

A bimonthly paper, “Union Messenger,” was started in 1945, which became the “Middle East Messenger” in 1948, and later also served as the official publication of the Middle East Division.¹⁰ When the office of the union in 1947 was moved from Alexandria in Egypt to Beirut in Lebanon, a new publishing house, Middle East Press, with printing facilities was founded. It replaced the Eastern Publishing Association, which had been operating from Egypt.¹¹

George Arthur Keough, who was an educator, administrator, and missionary, played an important role in the work of the Middle East Union at this time. As founder and first president of the Middle East College (1939-1949), he helped boost the educational work and prepare national workers for the fields. As the editor of the union paper from its start, he was also at the forefront in promoting evangelism and keeping the workers and members up to date on the news and developments in the various parts of the vast union territory!¹²

A “Voice of Prophecy” Bible Correspondence School was established in 1948 to augment the proclamation of the advent message. George Keough became its first director, and the office was located on the first floor of the Mouseitbeh Seventh-day Adventist Church in Beirut. The first students were primarily from Lebanon. With time, the Arabic and Armenian Bible lessons reached both Christians and non-Christians from the various Arab countries in the Middle East.¹³

With the declaration of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, new realities necessitated a reconsideration of the administration of the church in the Middle East region, and the Palestine Mission was temporarily administered directly by the General Conference. In 1951, the Middle East Division replaced the Middle East Union Mission.¹⁴

Executive Officers Chronology

Presidents: G. A. Keough (1941-1943); E. L. Branson (1943-1951).

Secretary-Treasurers: A. G. Rogers (1941-1943); C. H. Mackett (1943-1948); E. S. Cubley (1949-1951)!¹⁵

Institutions

Adventist Training School at Seila, Fayum, Egypt

Iran Training School at 2075 Pahlevi Avenue, Tehran, Iran

Iraq Training School at Mosul, Iraq

Matariah Mercy Home (Orphanage) at 8 Sharia, Balasan, Matariah (new Cairo), Egypt

Dar el Salaam Hospital at 444/1 Rashid Street, Baghdad, Iraq

Jerusalem Institute for Massage at Julians Way, Jerusalem, Palestine

Middle East Press at Post Office Box 1011, Beirut, Lebanon¹⁶

Middle East Union Mission (1970-2011)

In 2011, before the reorganization of the Middle East Union Mission to be the Greater Middle East Union Mission (later Middle East North Africa Union Mission), the territory included: Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen; comprising the East Mediterranean, Egypt, Iraq, South Sudan, and Sudan Fields; and the Cyprus and Gulf Sections. There were 84 churches, 18,966 members, and a population of 256,749,000.¹⁷

Organizational History

When the Afro-Mideast Division was organized in 1970¹⁸ replacing the Middle East Division by adding new countries from Eastern Africa to its territory, the Middle East Union Mission again got its union status under the new division. Division President M. E. Lind sent a letter to Elder R. H. Pierson of the General Conference regarding the plans to organize a Middle East Union (MEU).¹⁹ A provisional administrative committee for the union was set up on October 9, 1970, with R. L. Jacobs as chairman and R. C. Darnell as recording secretary.²⁰ At a MEU Annual Committee Meeting called at the end of the same year, an operating policy for the union was voted, and the territory organized into four fields: East Mediterranean (Cyprus, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey), Egypt, Iran, and Iraq (Iraq and Kuwait) Fields. The unentered territories (Libya, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, South Yemen, and the Arab Gulf States) were assigned to the union administration. The “Forward Thrust” coordinated evangelism plan promoted by the new Afro-Mideast Division president was adopted²¹ alongside a specialist TEAM to develop plans for reaching the majority population in the Middle East.²² The former Middle East Division paper, “Middle East Messenger,” became the union paper to be published on a quarterly basis.²³

The Middle East Union took over the offices of the Middle East Division at Sebtia Jdeidi in Beirut, Lebanon. The former field secretary of the Middle East Division, R. C. Darnell, became the president, Manoug Nazirian the secretary, and Rafic Issa the treasurer. The following departmental secretaries were later appointed: Jad Katrib (education), George Khoury (lay activities, radio/television, stewardship, and development), Manoug Nazirian (ministerial), R. C. Darnell (public relations and PARL), and Salam Aboujawdeh (publishing, Sabbath school, and youth).²⁴

During these initial years, leadership tried to tackle the many challenges in its vast territory. Literature projects in Arabic, Armenian, Farsi, and Turkish were supported and promoted. The challenge of Sabbath examinations in public schools was an issue that needed to be addressed, and the students were encouraged to be faithful.²⁵ Public evangelism was part of the thrust to reach people for Christ. In addition, workers were trained for temperance work, including 5-day stop smoking plans. All initiatives were set in motion to help people make new contacts. Much of the departmental work was focused on the membership in the fields and countries, where the work had been established for years, but the growth was slow.²⁶

On December 10, 1974, the union committee voted to move into new territory and establish the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Sudan. A place was rented for headquarters in Khartoum, and a Sudanese graduate from Middle East College, Ret Chol, who had returned to his homeland, was appointed as the director of the work.²⁷

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), which started with the assassination attempt on the Maronite Christian Phalangist leader Pierre Gemayel,²⁸ naturally affected the administration and work of the MEU. The MEU Quadrennial Session scheduled for 1976 was postponed until further notice.²⁹ A "War Emergency Bonus" was voted for workers who were on duty during July 1-31, 1976.³⁰ When the MEU First Quadrennial Session eventually took place during February 1-5, 1977, the session voted that the Middle East Union and the East Mediterranean Field be linked together for a two-year period, and that the Afro-Mideast Division departmental directors serve as union directors for a period of two years as well.³¹ As the situation tightened, the student missionary calls for Lebanon for the 1978-1979 term were cancelled.³²

When the Afro-Mideast Division in 1978 moved its headquarters to Cyprus due to the continuing emergency,³³ an action was taken to hold the regular union year-end meetings in Cyprus.³⁴ However, the MEU leadership didn't see a need to move its operations out of Lebanon yet. After almost 11 years, the relationship between the Afro-Mideast Division and Middle East Union came to an end when the new Eastern Africa Division was established and the Middle East Union became directly attached to the General Conference "until some other desirable solution can be found."³⁵

Although the union leadership tried to keep focus on the work in the face of the balance between peace and war, the situation in Lebanon deteriorated in the beginning of 1984 to the point that the US Embassy called for all American citizens to evacuate Beirut. Donald Eichner of Middle East College had direct contact with the embassy regarding the college personnel and the need for help with evacuation. American battleships lay ready at the coast to evacuate as many as possible. The local people contacted Union President Gerald Karst to strongly advise that all expatriates from the Middle East Union be evacuated because they would not be able to serve the union territory from Lebanon.³⁶

On February 5, 1984, an all-day emergency meeting was called in the MEU with the implementation of an evacuation plan on the agenda:

PRESENT: G. Karst, Y. Farag, R. Stokes, D. Eichner, R. Henrickson

INVITED: M. Nazirian, Dwight Rose, Donna Rose, H. Kolta, R. Roth, N. Tabingo

WHEREAS, since the last Middle East Union Committee action taken on January 31, 1984, (1) the Present Government has been seriously threatened by anti-government forces as evidenced by the intense shelling and fighting during the past three days, (2) and because of the uncertain future of the Present Government, it was

VOTED: to affect an immediate mandatory temporary evacuation of all non-Arabic speaking personnel to Cyprus, and optional evacuation of all non-Lebanese Middle Eastern personnel to their homelands.³⁷

Plans for the evacuation of Middle East College dormitory students and a day school program with available national staff for the winter quarter of 1984 were voted.³⁸ Further, a schedule of departure from February 7-10 to be followed as far as possible by each family and person was voted.

Further it was voted that all expatriate personnel be out of Lebanon by February 10, 1984, with the exception of Dr. Eichner, Elder Ray Roth, and William England. Their departure dates were to be worked out in consultation with the administration.³⁹

The American battleships could not take the union files and other equipment, so the Middle East Union hired a ship to take the personnel as well as the files to Cyprus. The crossing took place as scheduled on February 10 and lasted a full day. A building at 32 Gladstone Street, Nicosia, was renovated for a temporary office and living quarters.⁴⁰ The following year, office space was rented at 40 Evagoras Street, 2nd Floor, Nicosia.

The lack of well-trained national workers in the union and the stagnation of membership growth in the fields was already a concern before the war intensified. Church growth had had a hard time in the Middle Eastern countries, and expatriates were, to a great extent, still filling the leadership positions. In 1978, Najeeb W. Nakhle, a former national worker in the church, identified the critical problem of migration for the church in his ministerial doctoral project. He researched the reasons for the "brain drain" and emphasized the following:

The migration of the trained national Seventh-day Adventist Church workers is one of the most critical problems facing present-day church administrators in the Middle East Union of the Afro-Mideast Division. Because of this migration, a serious shortage of trained personnel exists at various levels of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in this union. This shortage results from the brain drain, which not only causes losses in the educated, experienced, and gifted personnel who are difficult to replace but is also responsible for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Middle East Union losing members.⁴¹

At the union session in 1988, a territorial reorganization of the union took place, and the following action was taken:

Voted: to recommend the following reorganization of fields territories in the union:

- a. East Mediterranean Field will now cover the countries of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (previously Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Cyprus, and Turkey).
- b. A new section will be opened known as the Gulf Section to cover Kuwait and the Gulf States under the union territory.
- c. Cyprus and Turkey will now be under the direct supervision of the union.⁴²

On December 1, 1989, the Middle East Union (MEU) moved into a new office at 12 Themistocles Dervis Street, also called *Palais d'Ivoire*, still close to the center of town and only a block from the former office.⁴³ Also, around this time, a new quarterly union paper, "MEU News," was published.

The work of ADRA Middle East and its ADRA country offices came to play a more important role in accessing some of the countries in the MEU territory and give encouragement and strength to the church work in others. The earthquake in Northern Iran in July 1990 created an opportunity to offer aid and visit the members. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War from August 1990 lead to a relief program for evacuees from Kuwait. ADRA was active in the Palestinian camps outside Amman in Jordan and running its programs in both the north and the south of the Sudan with all the challenges that followed. Later, an ADRA office was opened in Yemen.

In a union with relatively few members spread out in small churches and fields, the union institutions and departments play a vital role to support, encourage, provide materials, and create opportunities to meet and learn together. Middle East Press and the publishing department had for years taken such a role. The education department had been a strong support to the schools. Middle East College had been the meeting and learning place for the young people of the MEU. With the unrest and hostilities in Lebanon and other places, some of these important activities had been curtailed. The union administration, therefore, saw the need to give new emphasis to the work for the children and the youth.

At the General Conference Session in 1990, "Global Mission" was voted as a special initiative "to establish new Adventist churches where there are none to reach the unreached with hope."⁴⁴ The focus was on the 10/40 window, where the countries of the Middle East Union were an important part. A global mission service for the union was established in 1991 with Robert A. Thompson as the first director.⁴⁵

In August 1991, Sven H. Jensen, church ministries director, arranged for an international youth congress to be held at the Al Salaam Hotel in Heliopolis in the outskirts of Cairo. The guest speakers were Israel Leito and Mike Stevenson from the General Conference and Baraka Muganda from the East African Division. A quarterly youth publication, "Youth of the Hour," was launched in November of the same year and published for about 10 years, first in English and later in English and Arabic. Later, new materials for the children were provided with strong

support from the General Conference children's department.

As a further initiative, a new recording studio for radio broadcast was set up in Nicosia in 1992, and the Adventist Media Centre – Middle East was established with Bert Smit as its first director.⁴⁶ As part of the Global Mission effort, programs in Arabic were being broadcast, and lessons in Arabic were being offered from the correspondence school. This outreach proved vital to reach the unreached. Tentmakers were very active in some of these challenging countries.

In 1995, at the 56th General Conference Session in Utrecht, Holland, the union, which had become attached to the General Conference 14 years ago "until some other desirable solution [could] be found,"⁴⁷ was again joined with a division, and its territory was reduced from 17 to 14 countries. M. T. Battle, who had been a longtime member of the Middle East Affairs Committee and had known the union well, presented the proposal:

The recommendation is as follows: That the territories of the Middle East Union Mission that comprise the Cyprus Section, East Mediterranean Field, Egypt Field, Gulf Section, Iraq Field, and Sudan Field be transferred to the Trans-European Division, effective July 1, 1995. [Moved, seconded, and voted.]

We recommend the assignment of the territories of the Middle East Union Mission that comprise the Iran Field, the Turkey Section, and the unentered country of Libya to the Euro-Africa Division, effective July 1, 1995. [Moved, seconded, and voted.]⁴⁸

The Global Mission emphasis continued over the next few years with strong support from the Trans-European Division (TED). One of the areas that was given special attention was the building of bridges to the majority populations. The world church had set up a global office for Adventist Muslim Relations to develop approaches to better understand Muslims and improve the relations with them in redemptive ways. The "Faith development in context"⁴⁹ method was one of the ways that was emphasized in the Middle Eastern context, and training for Adventist believers was provided by the Global Mission directors from the TED and MEU. Encouraging results were reported.

Access to the church through traditional evangelism was most prominent in the Sudan, especially in the South. In 1994, the South Sudan Section was established with an office in Arua in Northeastern Uganda.⁵⁰ Because of the ongoing war between the rebel organization SPLA/SPLM and the Sudanese government in Khartoum as well as internal conflicts among wandering militia groups, it was not yet possible or safe to set up the section's headquarters inside Sudan. It was, however, possible for union and division personnel to travel inside together with the section leader to help train local pastors, evangelists, and teachers and start a secondary school in Maridi in 1996. The section was reorganized as a field in 1999.⁵¹ In Northern Sudan in and around Khartoum and some districts further south under government control, Global Mission pioneers from the local people were employed with two-year stipends provided by the General Conference Global Mission Office. This also gave a boost to evangelism and church growth even though later frustration was caused when the field and the union

were financially unable to offer permanent employment.

The Gulf countries saw a steady increase of members among the guest laborers, especially from South East Asia. Local groups and churches were being organized (Kuwait 1979, Dubai 1989, Ras Al Khaimah 1992, Bahrain 1993, Oman 1995, and others later).⁵² In 2001, the Middle East Union decided to reorganize the Gulf Section into Gulf Section North (Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar) and Gulf Section South (Oman, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) with a pastor assigned for each section.⁵³ Over time, the church in the Gulf countries moved toward self-support in contrast to the church in the old fields.

The migration continued to be a major challenge for the work of the church, especially in the countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.⁵⁴ Hostilities, hardships, and encouragement from family and friends abroad caused many to leave. Thus, it was not easy to find the qualified local leaders and pastors needed, and with the change of missionaries at regular intervals and the inability at times to fill vacancies, it was difficult to build up a strong and sustainable membership. In his 2006 Year-End Presidential Report, Kjell Aune put into words what many leaders have experienced over the years:

With all our countries and entities, the MEU seems to be in constant need of personnel. Throughout 2006, we were searching for three field presidents, five treasurers, and a new university president. This search takes a lot of time and effort. Some of our leaders and other workers around this union have been under enormous strain and work pressure because of the lack of officers, sometimes over extensive periods of time.⁵⁵

The union leadership and directors trained and prepared national workers for more responsibility whenever possible, as it was repeatedly on the union committee agendas. A good number of the national workers contributed admirably in educational institutions, media work, pastoral ministry, publishing work, government relations, and even leadership at the field and union levels. Elder Manoug H. Nazirian deserves special mention as one of the nationals that remained in the Middle East and contributed his services to the church in a lifetime. It became 43 years of official service, including being pastor for the Armenian Seventh-day Adventist Church in Beirut, youth director for the Lebanon Section, secretary and president for the East Mediterranean Field, president for the Middle East Union, and president for Middle East College. In addition, he served as Lebanon Legal Association president. His example to the youth, influence on the church, and contacts with government officials and church leaders outside the Adventist community was of invaluable importance.⁵⁶

In 1997, Dr. Thomas S. Geraty called a small number of Middle Eastern people living in the United States to form a new organization, which they named "Middle East Fellowship" (MEF). The bylaws state, "Middle East Fellowship is committed to the promotion of inter- and intra-relationships between the various Middle Eastern communities and friends of the Middle East whether they are in the United States or abroad. The purpose of the MEF shall be to promote the physical, international, intellectual, spiritual, social, and cultural aspects of its members, to further their corporate activities, and to assist in their shared concerns."⁵⁷ The MEF has, over the years, been meeting regularly at least twice a year for their retreats, often with a guest speaker from the Middle

East Union. As a strong support to the church in the Middle East, it has been able to send hundreds of thousands of dollars to the various entities of the MEU, in particular Middle East University (formerly Middle East College), reflecting the clause in the purpose of MEF “to assist in their shared concerns.”⁵⁸

Sometimes, the union leadership had to deal with unusual and dangerous circumstances. Once, a youth group of 15 from Khartoum, Sudan, went on an evangelistic mission further south and was caught in an ambush with shootings in May 1998. The union had to step in and charter a plane to bring the young people safely back.⁵⁹ Another time, a serious accident happened in Yemen, and kidnappings in Iraq and Dafur in the Sudan had to be resolved with the intervention of the union leader and others.⁶⁰

In 2002, the union office was moved to 61 Andrea Avraamides in the Nicosia suburb, Strovolos, where the Adventist Media Centre was already housed. Through the conversion of an apartment in the building to offices and some minor changes in other areas, union and Adventist Media Centre personnel were able to work under one roof with the added advantages. The reason for the move was stated by the MEU secretary/treasurer, Gordon Gray, when he explained the renovation of the building in “MEU News”:

There were several factors that prompted this renovation plan. It will facilitate the integration of functions of the Adventist Media Centre with the regular departmental structure of the MEU. It is further anticipated that this move will result in increased efficiency of the union in service to the fields, as well as saving approximately US\$25,000 currently spent each year in rent for office facilities.⁶¹

The administrative and treasury functions and some department directors were designated to the ground floor while several other department directors, the radio studios, and the correspondence school would be housed on the first floor.⁶²

After that, two or three commissions over the years had studied the possibility and need of moving the union office back to one of the Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Jordan, or Lebanon) and had not been able to come to a consensus. It was finally voted at the MEU year-end meetings in 2004 to move the office back to Beirut in Lebanon.⁶³

When the decision to move was made, renovations started on the former Middle East Press building on Ferdous Street, Sabtieh, Beirut, to convert it into a new union office. Houses and apartments close to the office were renovated, bought, or rented to house the union personnel. The plan was for everything to be ready for the move to take place in the summer of 2006. Then, the July War of 2006 between the Hezbollah paramilitary forces and the Israel Defence Forces took place and lasted 34 days, and the completion of the offices and the housing projects was delayed. Uncertain of when it was safe to move, some of the staff sent their children to school in Nicosia when the school year started. In the end, it was decided to postpone the move for one year until the summer of 2007, and the move was eventually carried out late in the summer.⁶⁴

In Beirut, after the union personnel had arrived and settled, the time had come to focus fully on the work again. Increased evangelistic activities were emphasized, and new resources like evangelistic literature and DVDs in Arabic and English were developed. A major evangelistic campaign by the union was conducted in Juba, Sudan, with support from the Trans-European Division and with several satellite meetings to create interest. Plans to reach into new territories (Saudi Arabia, Northern Cyprus, Syria, and Yemen) were set in motion. New facilities were acquired when and where needed. In Khartoum, Sudan, the office and apartment building that had been rented for many years was eventually bought. In Malakal, where a third field in Sudan (Upper Nile Field) would be organized, a new headquarters compound was built. In Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates, where land had been granted for a church building in 2007, a headquarters facility with offices and a church hall was built for the new Gulf Field that was organized in May 2011. Middle East University just next door to the union office underwent extensive renovations and attracted more students.⁶⁵

One of the more successful initiatives was the establishment of a new media center in Beirut with the television channel *Al Waad*, which means "The Promise." This was, according to Union President Kjell Aune, "the biggest evangelistic initiative in the Arabic-speaking world ever!"⁶⁶ It started in 2008 with the communication and media director of the Trans-European Division asking Egyptian-born Amir Ghali, who had worked with the Adventist Media Centre – Middle East in Cyprus, to move to Beirut and be in charge of a new media center with the production of television programs. The funding for this project would come from the extraordinary tithes from the General Conference. Amir Ghali moved over in September and contacted Middle East University for the lease of the former student center with adjacent rooms with the intent to turn it into studio space and offices. Everything had to be done from scratch, and a contractor was hired. It took about a year to rebuild the place and prepare it for television and radio work. Six people were employed to support the director in running the studio. The first program went on the air in February 2010. Adventist pastors and speakers from all over the Middle East and North Africa came to record their programs, and the 24-hour broadcast could be seen by about 200 million satellite television viewers in the Arabic-speaking world. Via live-streaming on the website, it would reach the world. Amir Ghali summed it up: "Many sincere souls have accepted Jesus through *Al Waad*. Only eternity will really tell how many individuals came to know the Lord through the broadcast."⁶⁷

Pastoral education was another top priority. The majority of pastors in the MEU had no formal pastoral training – especially so in the Sudan. The needed training was provided, and 41 Sudanese pastors graduated with a BA degree in religion in 2010. In 2011, a cohort group of MEU students started an MA degree in Islamic studies. This would prove an important step with a great potential for the future work in this part of the world.⁶⁸

Near the end of the Middle East Union era, without considering radio listeners, television viewers, and secret believers, statistics seem to indicate that the impact of the efforts by the field and union leadership over the course of almost 40 years bore fruit among the Sudanese people and guest laborers in the Gulf. When this period started in 1970, there were 3,650 Adventist members in a population of 142,133,000, all from the old Arabic-speaking countries except for a few from Iran and Turkey. In 2010, the membership had risen to more

than 19,000 in a population of 256,749,000, an increase of over 520 percent. However, out of the 19,000 members, 16,531 were Sudanese, and 855 were guest laborers from the Gulf, which leaves around 1,600 from the Arabic-speaking countries, where the church had been established and worked the longest. For these countries, the official membership number has been halved while the population has grown dramatically.

Some of the causes of church members and people in general leaving the Middle East have been the hostilities, hardships, and lack of opportunities. Another reason could be that, when opportunities opened up in the Sudan and Gulf countries, investment of time and resources were focused more on the new areas where there seemed to be greater potential for growth, while the old countries with many years of Adventist presence got less attention. The Global Mission concept certainly encouraged work in the unentered territories. The full impact of the Adventist Muslim Relations initiatives that were carried out is still unknown.

The World Church was convinced that the Adventist message of hope needed to be carried to every part of the world before the Second Coming of Christ. It saw that, in spite of over 100 years of work, the Middle East region continued to be a major challenge for spreading the gospel and the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Therefore, the leadership of the World Church once again saw a need to address the work of the Church in the Middle East. On August 24, 2010, the General Conference Administrative Committee set up a survey commission with the assignment “to study the work of the Church in the greater Middle Eastern area of the 10/40 Window and bring back a report to the 2011 Spring Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee. This report may include a recommendation for territorial realignment.”⁶⁹

At the Annual Council in 2011, the recommendations from the survey commission finally resulted in establishing a new Greater Middle East Union Mission directly attached to the General Conference. The new union mission would include the countries of Algeria, Bahrain, North Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen, countries that all had contiguous borders in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas. South Sudan would be part of the East-Central Africa Division, and South Cyprus would remain with the Trans-European Division. It was reasoned that countries with similar challenges and cultural backgrounds from two former divisions (Euro-Africa Division and Trans-European Division) would work better under one administrative unit in the Middle East, facilitating greater collaboration and coordination for the progress of the work. Further, “attaching this high priority area directly to the General Conference would allow proposals and decisions at the highest level of church administration to speed up the process of implementation.”⁷⁰

The action voted by the Annual Council would be effective from January 1, 2012, and the Middle East Union Mission thus ended as an administrative unit on December 31, 2011. About a year later, the Greater Middle East Union Mission changed its name to the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission.⁷¹

Executive Officers Chronology⁷²

Presidents: R. C. Darnell (1970-1976); Manoug Nazirian (1977-1982); James A. Finn (1982-1983); Gerald D. Karst (1983-1988); Svein B. Johansen (1988-1995); Sven H. Jensen (1995-2001); Michael Porter (2001-2005); Kjell Aune (2005-2011).

Secretary-Treasurers: T. G. Staples (1978-1983); Roy Henrickson (Acting) (1983-1984); Nelson A. Tabingo (1984-1991); Sergie Ferrer (1991-1995); Daniel D. Orillosa (1995-1997); William B. Olson (1997-2000); Gordon R. J. Gray (2000-2002); Homer Trecartin (2002-2005); Conrad Vine (2005-2007); Richard Novlesky (2007-2008).

Secretary: Manoug Nazirian (1970-1977); Tibor Szilvasi (2008-2011).

Treasurer: T. Raffic Issa (1970-1976); Richard Novlesky (2008-2011).

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