

Uganda

DANIEL M. MATTE

Daniel M. Matte, D.Min. (Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya), is currently the president of Uganda Union Mission. He previously served as the Uganda Union Mission executive secretary. He also served as president of a field, a departmental director and a frontline pastor. He is married to Sarah Mbambu Matte and they have seven children.

Uganda is a landlocked country bordered by Kenya in the east, South Sudan in the north, Democratic Republic of the Congo in the west, Rwanda in the southwest, and Tanzania in the south. Uganda's total land area is 241,559 sq km. About 37,000 sq km of this area is occupied by open water while the rest is land. The southern part of the country includes a substantial portion of Lake Victoria, which it shares with Kenya and Tanzania.¹

The country is located on the East African plateau, averaging about 1,100 meters (3,609 ft) above sea level. The plateau generally slopes downwards towards Sudan, which explains why most rivers in the country tend to flow north.² According to Uganda Bureau of Statistics population estimates of 2018, Uganda's population stands at 40 million people. Close to half of the 40 million are young people between 0-14 years of age.³ This makes Uganda one of the youngest countries in the world. This fact means the population is full of young, energetic life with its opportunities as well as challenges.

Early Beginnings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda

According to *The South African Missionary* periodical, a South African Seventh-day Adventist Church paper of the early 1900s, the decision to establish the Seventh-day Adventist work in East Africa, which included Uganda, was made in South Africa at a council meeting that was convened between March 19-26, 1903. The prominent members of this council included Brother Booth from Nyassaland Mission, Brother Freeman of Basutoland Mission, and Brother Anderson of the Matabeleland Mission. These three, referred to as "brethren of experience" together with others not mentioned by name, sat in South Africa, where the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was already established at that time, to discuss how to expand the Seventh-day Adventist work among native Africans and the best methods to be used. This council made the following recommendations to the Home Board:

1. That it is better to plant a few mission stations that are well equipped rather than have a larger number of small stations.
2. That the Board plans for six stations along the east coast and north of the Zambesi. These were to be located in Nyassaland, German East Africa (currently known as Tanzania), Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), Upper Nile (currently

known as South Sudan), and Madagascar. Then the periodical specifically stated that Brother Booth wanted to establish a station in Uganda, which would make the sixth station.

3. The council decided that, as a means of establishing these stations, they were to teach the natives to read and write his or her own language, and then offer him or her an education in English, corresponding to the sixth or seventh grade. This was seen as a way of putting the key in the hand of the native who desires an education so that he or she could unlock the fountains of knowledge stored up in the English language.

The vision and the desire of council members is captured as follows: "To these great centres it is believed the natives will come, providing we offer them the knowledge desired; and, having obtained it, also a knowledge of the truth, many will return to teach it to their people. Thus the truth will be scattered all through these sections."⁴

Based on this information, the idea and decision to begin the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda was made in South Africa in the month of March in 1903 at a missionary council. The person who championed this effort is Brother Booth, who at that time was working in Nyasaland, present-day Malawi. *The South African Missionary* periodical of June 1903 reported that Brother Booth visited Uganda in 1903 to contact the local natives, assess the needs, and study the openings available in Uganda to begin the work. He is said to have come to Uganda via Mombasa and travelled inland by train to the shores of Lake Victoria, which he crossed by steamer, then landed at Entebbe. His assessment report to the team in South Africa was that he had found many people in Uganda anxious to learn and interested in the elevating influence of the gospel.⁵ He further reported that the authorities offered very favorable inducements to establish mission stations, and that a splendid site for a mission station and schools in Uganda, with buildings already erected, was offered on agreeable terms. The report ended by indicating that Brother Booth left Uganda for England via Cape Town to raise funds to begin the work in Uganda.⁶

From June 1903 onwards, little is known about the plans to begin the Seventh-day Adventist work in Uganda, until 24 years later in 1927. This long delay to open, even after the decision to begin the work and initial contacts were established as early as 1903, suggests a hindrance of some kind appeared. The later historical indicators suggest that this long delay was most likely due to the local prevailing political and religious unrest that happened in Uganda. Nevertheless, it is recorded that the first Seventh-day Adventist to enter Uganda was E. C. Enns, a German missionary who was working at Suji in the Pare region of Tanzania (Tanganyika then) who entered the country from South Nyanza, Kenya in 1906.⁷ According to Virgil Robinson, "Enns called on Bishop Tucker of the Church Missionary Society during his several weeks of stay in the country. He is reported also to have called on the Regent of Buganda and saw two young christian princes, one of whom was the eleven-year-old Kabaka (king). It is said that the regent urged him to establish a medical mission among his people."⁸ Thus, the first official missionary was sent 20 years after the initial contact.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda, whose history in the country officially began in the year 1927, is part of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church headquartered in Maryland, USA. As of December 2019, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda has enjoyed 92 years in mission service, and will be celebrating 100 years of service in Uganda in the year 2027. The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda continues to be making disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to all people the everlasting Gospel of the Three Angels' Messages in preparation for His soon return (Matt 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, Rev 14:6-12).⁹

When the Adventist faith in Uganda started in 1927, Uganda had already been a British territory since 1894 when it was declared a British protectorate.¹⁰ By 1927, there were other Christian missionaries operating in Uganda. Catholic missionaries from France arrived in Uganda in 1879 and, from that year, Catholics have operated in Uganda.¹¹ Eight years later, in 1887, the first Anglican missionaries under the Church Missionary Society reached Uganda, and the Anglican faith has since then been operating in Uganda.¹² When Christian missionaries arrived in Uganda, they got involved in rivalry and bloody conflicts with Muslims who had been in the country since 1840s with all of them on one hand and the local kings of Buganda on the other hand.¹³ This situation has been part of Ugandan history way beyond colonial times. The new British colonial agents addressed this situation by assigning each of the contending religious parties specific areas in Uganda as their sphere of influence.¹⁴

The late arrival of Adventist missionaries in Uganda in 1927 is understood to have been due to these religious and political struggles in Uganda because Adventist missionaries were already in neighboring Kenya and Tanzania by 1903 and 1906 respectively.¹⁵ This is according to Pastor Eridadi Mwanje Mwesige, who is now in his late 90s and who was baptized in 1935, making him one of the native pioneer Adventist pastors in Uganda. He worked with the very first Adventist missionaries, namely S. G Maxwell and Petero Risasi, a Tanzanian. These pioneer Adventist missionaries said that other Adventist missionaries had tried to enter Uganda before 1927 but were prevented by both the colonial and native authorities under the argument that "there was already enough religions in Uganda."¹⁶ When Adventist missionaries arrived in Uganda in 1927, they were sent to Nchwanga, which is far away from Kampala, the center of both native and colonial authorities.

Nchwanga is located about 173 kilometers from Kampala towards the west. This area is located on the border of the two native kingdoms of Buganda and Bunyoro. Buganda had annexed this territory from Bunyoro in the expansionist policies of the British colonialists who were working with Buganda as their allies. Socially, the people of the Nchwanga territory were disgruntled and suspicious because they were subjected to both colonial rule and Buganda subjugation since Buganda had become the tool of spreading both colonial rule and Christianity. The Adventist missionaries found that Uganda was already zoned among Anglican Protestant missionaries, Catholic missionaries, and Muslims. Accordingly, they were sent to Nchwanga and were expected to fail because they were sent into a disturbed area and the people of this area were naturally suspicious of anything coming from Kampala and Buganda. By providence, Adventists were able to establish a mission station

in Nchwanga in the year 1927.¹⁷

According to Eridadi Mwanje Mwesige, shortly after Nchwanga was opened in 1927 as the first official mission station of the Adventist Church in Uganda, S. G. Maxwell and Petero Risasi were travelling from Kampala back to Nchwanga. For some reason, they had to spend a night at Mityana. Mityana is about 70 kilometers from Kampala on the road to Mubende and then to Nchwanga. Because there was a lack of lodging services in Mityana township during that time, the two missionaries spent the night in a kitchen of a local shopkeeper by the name of Ananiya Guggwa, who offered to give them a place to stay. On the following morning, S. G. Maxwell proceeded to Nchwanga and left Petero Risasi in Mityana.¹⁸

Since he had a missionary mindset, Petero Risasi started contacting the natives in Mityana, sharing his faith and looking for people who might have interest in his message. It was during this initial search that he contacted a native by the name of Henry Guweddeko, who gladly became interested in the message of Petero Risasi and accepted the Adventist message. Henry Guweddeko in turn contacted his brother Simeon Golola, who also accepted the Adventist message. These two brothers both lived in Kanamba, near Mityana. In these pioneer efforts in Mityana, Risasi came in touch with a blind man called Joshua Kidawalime. This man also accepted the Adventist faith and became the very first convert in Uganda to be baptized. He was baptized at Nchwanga. The two brothers, namely Henry Guweddeko and Simeon Golola, were also baptized later and were among the native pioneer teachers and evangelists in Uganda.¹⁹ They were helpful as translators for the Luganda local language. Mityana is thus credited with having produced the first three converts to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda. Still, the first mission station and church were at Nchwanga.

Initial Church Organization Foundations

Because Nchwanga was far from Kampala the government seat and the center of power, it was important to locate land to open another mission station around Kampala. In 1930, land was bought on Kireka Hill, about seven kilometers from Kampala off Kampala-Jinja Road to the right from Kampala. Kireka Mission Station, which opened in 1930, became a major center for coordinating the Adventist Church work in Buganda, Bunyoro, and Tooro regions of Uganda. The very first mission director at Kireka was F. H. Muderspack. The official name for this mission territory was Central Uganda Mission. This station became the base from which the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda was coordinated for many years until more reorganization was done in the early 1980's.

Kakoro Mission Station was opened in 1934. It became the center for Eastern Uganda Mission with M. E. Lind as its first mission director.²⁰ Other mission stations that were added later included Katikamu Mission Station in Buganda (1943) and Rwenzori Mission Station at Mitandi (1945)²¹, which became the center for spreading the Adventist faith in the Rwenzori region in Western Uganda. Ankole Mission Hospital was opened in 1950 in the South Western region of Uganda, which by then was also known as Ankole-Kigezi area. Ankole Mission Hospital

was started at Ishaka with a 60-bed capacity. D. L. Stilson was its first medical director, and Elsa Brandt was their first nurse.²² This mission hospital, in addition to the healing ministry, spearheaded the spread of the Seventh-day Adventist faith in South Western Uganda.

Between 1941 and 1942, the Seventh-day Adventist Church work in Uganda was organized into a union mission called the Upper Nile Union Mission. At that time there were fourteen organized churches and a membership of 490 believers. The first leader for this union mission was V. E. Toppenberg and the secretary was E. W. Perderson while the treasurer was Miss M. Sachs.²³ One year later, Uganda lost its union status and became part of the East African Union Mission based in Kenya.²⁴ The impact of the effects of World War II is understood to have been behind this merger. The Seventh-day Adventist Church work in Uganda remained part of the East African Union for 45 years until 1987, when Uganda Union Mission was organized to coordinate Seventh-day Adventist mission activities and church administration in Uganda.

Political Instability and its Impact on Church Activities

Uganda gained political independence from the British on October 9, 1962. The subsequent political wrangling between the leading political forces resulted in what is locally known in Uganda as the 1966 Crisis.²⁵ From 1966 up to 1986, Uganda as a country experienced a lot of political unrest, which resulted in prolonged civil wars where many people died and others fled the country.²⁶ The economy of the country collapsed as a result, and Uganda experienced other psycho-social consequences with healing from this still going on. As the country was going through the political, social, and economic hard times, the Church also had its own challenges and hardships as well. It was banned in the country from 1977 to 1979. The banning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church by President Idi Amin Dada (1971-1979) had a negative impact on the Church and its operations in Uganda.²⁷ Because the Church was outlawed, some of its land was confiscated, and the government took over some of its schools, converting them into public schools. Bugema Adventist College, the flagship of Adventist education in Uganda, had started offering a degree in theology for the East Africa Union. Because of the ban, the college had to cease its operations, but the ministerial training was relocated to Watamu at the Indian Ocean coast near Malindi, Kenya.²⁸ Several missionaries had to leave the country. Church pastors left their workplaces for their own safety while some others were arrested. All church buildings were closed for any use. Members could only occasionally take care of these buildings which were largely abandoned during the ban. Officially, the church had to go underground but remained in operation. Lay people were mainly in charge of congregations that met for worship in private homes. To avoid being detected, worship and fellowship meetings moved from one location to another. Pastors coordinated church work from private homes, and church services like baptisms were secretly conducted mainly at night.²⁹ Officially, the ban ended when Idi Amin was overthrown by a combined force of some Ugandans assisted by the Tanzanian army in 1979.³⁰ While the political conditions in Uganda remained unstable from 1980 to 1986, the church made steady recovery, and progress during that

period led to the organization of Uganda Union Mission in 1987.³¹

Union Mission Status and Further Reorganization

The decision to organize the Seventh-day Adventist work in Uganda into a union mission was made by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at its Annual Council of 1986 which met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 7-14, 1986. The decision was officially made on October 10, 1986, and it became effective January 1, 1987.³²

When Uganda Union Mission was organized in 1987, it had a membership of 44,358 members shared between Central Uganda Field, based at Kireka-Kampala with a membership of 25,605 members, and Western Uganda Field, based in Fortportal with a membership of 18,753 members.³³ Since 1987, more reorganization has happened because the Church continued to grow in the country. As of December 2019, the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda was organized into one conference and five mission fields. Their names and years of organization and reorganization are as follows: Central Uganda Conference (1927, 1982, 1989, 2009), Rwenzori Field (1927, 1982, 1989, 1995, 2012), Western Uganda Field (1989), Eastern Uganda Field (1989), Northern Uganda Field (1992, 2012), and South Western Uganda Field (1995, 2015).³⁴

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda owns other institutions through which it serves the people of Uganda and fulfills its mission. Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA Uganda) is the arm of the Church that deals with social development, relief, and disaster response. Home Health Education Services (HHES) deals with the securing and distribution of church publications to distribute both to the church members and the public with wholesome literature that promotes spirituality, family life, healthful living, human wellness, and wholesome behavior. The church also operates Bugema University and six other tertiary institutions of learning, 30 secondary schools, and 195 primary schools that promote learning and provide skills for service and transformation. In the area of health, the Church in Uganda owns Ishaka Adventist Hospital and, as this is being published, it is in the process of building Kireka Adventist Hospital in Kampala and Kyaka Adventist Hospital. The Church also operates 21 other health centers in Uganda. For media evangelism purposes, the Church owns four FM radio stations through which it communicates to the church and the general public.

SOURCES

Galimaka, Herbert Ithran. *Conflicts in Church and Society in Uganda with Special Reference to Politics and Education*. M.A Thesis. University of Durham, Department of Theology, Durham, England, 1997.

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Annual Statistical Reports*. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Various years.

Hyatt, W. S. "Council Meetings," *South African Missionary*, April 1903.

Hyatt, W. S. "A Visit to East Africa," *South African Missionary*, June 1903.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook Various years. <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

Uganda National Web Portal. "About Uganda – History." Accessed March 25, 2019. <https://gou.go.ug/about-uganda/sector/history>.

NOTES

1. "About Uganda: Facts and Figures", accessed September 8, 2019, <https://www.gou.go.ug/content/facts-figures>.
2. Ibid.
3. "Population of Uganda", accessed September 8, 2019, <https://www.ubos.org/explore-statistics/statistical-datasets/6133/>.
4. W. S. Hyatt, "Council Meetings," *South African Missionary*, April 1903, 17.
5. W. S. Hyatt, "A Visit to East Africa," *South African Missionary*, June 1903, 3.
6. Ibid.
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1996, s.v. "Uganda."
8. Virgil Robinson, "The History of Africa," DF 4001-E, 277, Ellen White Research Center, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich.
9. Mission Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed 4 April 2019 <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/statements/article/go/-/mission-statement-of-the-seventh-day-adventist-church/>.
10. Patrick T. English, *Archives of Uganda*, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://americanarchivist.org/doi/abs/10.17723/aarc.18.3.r255527q36w10h79>.
11. Ibid, 5
12. Herbert Ithran Galimaka, *Conflicts in Church and Society in Uganda with Special Reference to Politics and Education* (M.A Thesis University of Durham, Department of Theology, Durham, England, 1997), 4.
13. Ibid., 14, 15
14. Patrick T. English, *Archives of Uganda*, 225.
15. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Annual Statistical Reports*, (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1909), 18.

16. Mwesige, Eridadi Mwanje, interview by Daniel Matte. He has also written a booklet entitled: Entandikwa y'Obwadventi Mu Uganda (Translated as: *The Beginning of Adventism in Uganda*). On page 4 of his booklet, he indicates the denial of Adventist missionaries in Uganda in 1920 with the fact that the faiths of Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Islam were deemed sufficient faiths for Uganda by the authorities at that time.
17. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Annual Statistical Reports*, (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1928), 5.
18. Mwanje Eridadi, interview by Daniel Matte.
19. Ibid.
20. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1942), 159.
21. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1950), 179.
22. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1951), 288.
23. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1950), 179.
24. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1942), 160.
25. "Uganda's Political History," accessed September 8, 2019, <http://www.ugandahighcommissionpretoria.com/Political-History-of-Uganda.html>.
26. Uganda National Web Portal "About Uganda – History," accessed March 25, 2019, <https://gou.go.ug/about-uganda/sector/history>.
27. AP story of religions banned in Uganda by Idi Amin including Baha'i Faith, accessed September 7, 2019. https://www.newspapers.com/clip/315869/ap_story_of_religions_banned_in_uganda.
28. "Bugema University" accessed April 11, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bugema_University.
29. Pastor Benezeri Bageni was one of the Ugandan retired pastors who went through the ban.
30. "Ugandan dictator Idi Amin overthrown" accessed April 11, 2019. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/idi-amin-overthrown>.
31. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1988.
32. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, "Annual Council Minutes of the General Conference" (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: General Conference, October 7-14, 1986).

33. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Annual Statistical Reports*, (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1987), 15.

34. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2017), 66, 67.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000