

Southern Highlands Conference

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Southern Highlands Conference is made of Mbeya, Njombe, Ruvuma, Katavi, and Songwe regions of the United Republic of Tanzania. Its headquarters are at Iganzo (Mbowo) in Mbeya. Southern Highlands Conference is formerly known as South-West Tanzania Field (organized 1960).¹

As of June 30, 2018, the conference had 490 churches, church membership of 59,004, and total population of 7,791,612.²

At the time of its organization in 2008, it had the following church districts and number of members in each district: Chunya (440), Ileje (467), Iringa (1,711), Laela (611), Ludewa (497), Kyela (838), Kiwira (1,346), Mbeya (1,549), Mbalizi (761), Mafinga (1,770), Mufindi, Matai (1,025), Makete (123), Sumbawanga (1,896), Songea (413), Njombe (1,145), Tukuyu (1,145), Tunduru (99), Ruanda (2,043), Mbozi (1,905), Mbinga (570), Namanyere (741), Usangu (517), Sopa (1,520), Makambako (1,238), Mwakaleli (409), and Ilula (767), which make a total of 28 districts and 27,541 church members.³

As of March 26, 2019, 31 more church districts have been established, as follows: Mlowo (1,412), Swebo (1,118), Njombe Kati (843), Lupembe (279), Mishamo (137), Usevya (1,420), Rukwa (647), Ndalambo (586), Kamsamba (634), Mkwajuni (462), Forest (725), Izumbwe (832), Uyole (996), Ikulu (673), Tunduma (2,157), Ileje (417), Madaba (451), Ludewa (367), Kantalamba (1,551), Kakese (1,146), and Namtumbo (125), making a total of 45,569 church members, 378 churches, and 435 companies.⁴

Organizational History

For the first three decades of the Adventist presence in Tanzania, 1903 through 1933, the Adventist Church's evangelistic activities were confined to the northern part of the country. The earliest attempt to reach the southern highlands of Tanzania with the Adventist message was made in 1933 by George A. Ellingworth, president of the Tanganyika Mission Field, who made an exploratory trip to the south to search for land with the view of starting a mission station. In the course of his search, he identified seven parcels of land: four among the Hehe of Iringa and three in the Mbeya region. However, there was no follow up on this attempt.⁵

The Adventist work in the present Southern Highlands Conference is considered to have started officially in 1938 when A. Sprogis, president of Tanganyika Mission Field, sent Rudolph Reider, a Germany missionary, to set up a mission station in the southern highlands of Tanganyika. On arrival that year, Reider established a mission station at Iganzo (Mbowo), two and a half miles (four kilometers) north of the center of the present city of Mbeya. He learned that there were three ethnic groups around him, the Safwa, the Nyakyusa, and the Sangu, and therefore decided to build one school for each group as his outreach strategy. Reider's goal was to penetrate all three groups, although he believed that the Sangu were the most promising. It was discovered later, however, that the Nyakyusa were the most receptive to the Adventist message among these three ethnic groups. Teachers in those days were assigned two tasks—to teach in school and to evangelize the community around the school.⁶

Reider's activities did not have any great effect, for the Second World War broke out before he was able to baptize anyone or establish any degree of permanence. Teachers from Majita and Ikizu, Lukius Mkobe and Petro Mwasi, were also present, but Reider's departure in 1939 created a real vacuum. His successor, Paulo Kilonzo, came to Mbeya in 1940 after Reider had already been away for about one year. In the same year Elder Short from America arrived, and he was assisted by Paulo Kilonzo and William Mnindi. In 1942, Elder Short left and his place was filled by a missionary, Malley, from South Africa. He worked as a missionary for only one year and then left. At the same time Onesmo Laudo from Usukuma replaced Lukius Mkobe whose contract had expired.

The years 1943 to 1960 were the years of intensive evangelism in Mbeya with greater involvement of Tanganyikan workers. During the years 1943 to 1945 Raphael Odunga worked as an evangelist-teacher in Mbeya. The Lord worked through him to spread the good news to people he met at Masoko. During the same years, Zakaria Muhuri arrived from Usukuma, followed by Tuvako Senzala from Upare. They were all assigned the work of teaching and evangelizing. Pastor Yakobo Mgeni also arrived around that time and was sent to Masoko. This pastor was blessed with some converts in the area. His first fruits at Masoko were Mishael Mwamlangala, Daudi Mwaisakila, Andondile Mwaipungu, and Rowland Mulinda. During this period, Elder Spronge and Elder Chessy from South Africa arrived in Mbeya. God's work progressed and students in the Adventist schools increased.

The year 1944 is an important one in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Southern Highlands Conference, because it was the year in which the first baptism was held. It was on June 3, 1944, when Joram Mwakigobe, George Mwangosi, Yakobo, and Yakobo's wife were baptized. These were the first four baptized Adventists in Mbeya. After the baptism, the four joined the missionaries in the work of reaching their fellow Nyakyusa and other people in the locality. The second baptism was conducted in 1946 in which three believers were baptized: Gidion Kalambile, Frankson Mwakogobe, and Andengenyne Kajigite.⁷

When missionaries Oliver and Fredonia Jacques arrived in 1946, they gave the station the new impetus that was needed to further the gospel work in Mbeya. The Jacques' main achievement was to establish a school at

Masoko, one of the few areas where Adventists would grow to become a small folk church. The work at Masoko was relatively successful after the conversion of Tito William Mwakibinga. Mwakibinga had worked as a policeman before and had converted to Adventism while monitoring evangelistic meetings conducted by the denomination. He had strongly advocated that Adventist work be started at Masoko and he offered the plot for the school building. Although Mwakibinga was trained as an evangelist in Uganda, he preferred returning to his native Masoko as an unpaid lay evangelist rather than being employed by the church and being sent to other areas. His enthusiasm for house-to-house visitation and preaching at social gatherings such as funeral assemblies made a lasting impression on his people.⁸

Apart from Masoko, Adventists gained some prominence in four other areas: Mwakaleli, also situated in the Tukuyu area, Tenende near Kyela, Izumbwe near Mbeya, and Iganzo near Mbeya town, where the headquarters of the mission station was located.

The Mbeya mission station continued to flourish under the leadership of G. Van Niekerk (1947) and M. Musgrave (1948-1949). In 1950 George Parsley was transferred from Ikizu to Mbeya station where he worked as the station director and was assisted by Yohana Msafiri. In 1956 the Iganzo Adventist Church was built under the leadership of Elder Parsley. Church members assisted in the church construction by providing manual labor. During Parsley's leadership more teachers and pastors from Upare were sent to work in the mission of Mbeya. These were: Benjamin Mkichwe, Justin Salim, Tuvako Senzala, and Yohana Msafiri. On arrival they were sent to different parts of the mission as teacher-evangelists. In 1957 John Moses from Upare joined the Mbeya Mission Station and was sent to Tukuyu as a district pastor. From there Moses took care of Kyela, Mwakaleli, and Tukuyu itself. For some time Masoko Church remained under the care of Elder Nakao Ndege while the Izumbwe school was manned by George Mwasumbi, Yohana Msafiri, Yakobo Mgeni, and Alinanine Mwambogela. In 1959 Pastor Benjamin Mkichwe returned to Upare and his place was taken by Yohana Msafiri from Izumbwe.⁹

In 1959 God's work continued to flourish. The year was graced by a good number of new converts who joined the Adventist Church. The new converts included: Alinanine Mwambogela, George Mwasumbi, Josia Mwakalinga, Ese, Andrea Mwamwifu, and others. After Raphael Odunga left Masoko and Tenende, there came in Abduel Tuvako, Yakobo Mgeni, Agustino Chamba, Yohana Lugoo, and Othniel Singo. In 1960 George Parsley was transferred to Harare and for some time Mbeya Mission Station was left under the leadership of Tanganyikans until 1961 when Hugh Stevenson, a South African, was transferred from Ikizu to Mbeya station as a new station director. In 1960 Tanganyika Mission Field was granted the status of Union Mission and Mbeya Mission became part of the Tanganyika General Field which had its headquarters at Morogoro.

Of the six political regions which constitute Southern Highlands Conference, the second earliest region to receive the Adventist message was Iringa. The Adventist message was brought to Iringa for the first time in 1960 by Medylene Howard who was an Adventist woman married to a non-Adventist. The Howards came from South Africa and settled in Mufindi as large-scale farmers who owned a pyrethrum plantation at Kibidula in Mafinga.

Medylene turned out to be a fervent Adventist who shared the Adventist message with everyone she met. She distributed to her employees Bibles and other literature bearing the present truth. As a result of her outreach activities the first baptism in Iringa in took place in 1962 when three people were baptized. The Howards returned to South Africa in 1964.¹⁰

The other four regions (Njombe, Ruvuma, Rukwa, and Katavi), which once formed part of the present Southern Highlands Conference, were gradually evangelized through the regular outreach activities of the pastors and church members under the administration of the Tanganyika (since 1964 Tanzania) General Field, organized in 1960 with headquarters in Morogoro; West Tanzania Field (WTF), organized in 1982 with headquarters in Mbeya; South West Tanzania Field, organized in 1991 with headquarters in Mbeya; and Southern Highlands Conference (SHC), organized in 2008 and reorganized in 2013, 2016, and 2018, with headquarters in Mbeya. In 2013 Mpanda district was added to SHC from WTC. In 2016 Iringa region was removed from SHC and became part of CTF. In 2018 Songwe, Rukwa, and Katavi were organized to form Lake Tanganyika Field.

Significant Events that Led to the Formation of the Southern Highlands Conference

From 1943 to 1945, evangelist Raphael Odunga worked as a teacher-evangelist in Mbeya. The Lord helped him to spread God's good news to people he met. His first convert was Tito Mwakibinga, a policeman who later became an evangelist. Zakaria Muhuri came from Usukuma, followed by Tuvako Senzala from Upare. They were all assigned the same work. Later William Muntindi and Abduel finished their contract.

Pastor Yakobo Mgeni arrived and later was sent to Masoko, Rungwe district. This pastor was blessed for working so hard in that he had the first converts. They were Mishael Mwamlangala, Daudi Mwaisakila, Andondile Mwaipungu, and Rowland Mulinda.

In 1959 God's work expanded and there were a number of converts to the church. They included Alinanine Mwambogela, George Mwasumbi, Josia Mwakalinga, Ese, Andrea Mwamwifu, and others. After Raphael Odunga's departure from Masoko and Tenende, next came Abduel Tuvako, Yakobo Mgeni, Augustino Chamba, Yohana Lugoo, and Othiniel Singo. Evangelist Tito Mwakibinga continued to take care of Masoko Church, though he had been terminated and therefore was no longer a church employee.

Elder George Pursley began work in Mbeya in 1955. He met with Pastor Benjamin Mkichwe who had arrived a year earlier. The same year evangelist Nakao Ndege arrived from Tarime to assist Pastor Benjamin Mkichwe. Before long he was posted to Masoko as an evangelist. He replaced Tito Mwakinga who was not an employee of the Church.

In 1956 church members provided manual labor and Iganzo church was built under the leadership of Elder Pursley.

In 1957 Pastor Joshua Salim and evangelist Yohana Msafiri arrived. They didn't stay long in Mbeya. Pastor Salim was sent to Izumbwe as a teacher where he met Yakobo Mgeni and Ajabuel. In the same year, from Upare, came Pastor John Moses and he was sent to Tukuyu as a district pastor. He took charge of the work in Tukuyu, Kyela, and Mwakaleli. Masoko Church remained under the control of Elder Nakao Ndege and the school remained with George Yakobo from Izumbwe, along with Alinanine Mwambogela.

In 1959 Pastor Benjamin Mkichwe returned to Upare. He was replaced by Yohana Msafiri from Izumbwe. The following year, George Pursley was transferred to Harare and Tom Alphonse left for Bupandagila Ntusu (Usukuma). Beginning in 1967 pastors came and went according to the decisions of the current leadership. The changes were the routine ones which provided opportunities for congregations to benefit from the varying talents of the various pastors. Work continued to grow under different leaders and pastors until February 4, 2008, when the Southern Highlands Conference was organized. It was organized as a result of a steady growth of the work due to the mission-oriented leadership of the administrators, pastors, and church members.

Executive Officers Chronology¹¹

Presidents: E. B. Wanjara (1982-1991); J. Kuyenga (1991-1995); S. Bina (1995-2000); J. Kajula (2000-2005); W. Mutani (2006-2007); I. Maiga (2007-2010); J. Mngwabi (2011-Feb. 2015); R. N. Nkoko (Feb.-Aug. 2015); K. A. Mwasomola (Nov. 2015-present).

Executive Secretaries: T. T. O. Ilomo (1982-1989); C. Randa (1989-1992); Z. Masele (1992-1998); S. Bukuku (1999-2005); G. Mangilima (2006-2007); D. K. Mwambeta (2007-2008); E. Chaboma (2008-2010); E. Lomay (2011-2013); S. Letta (2013); R. G. Khaniki (2014-present).

Treasurers: T. T. Ilomo (1982-1989); C. Randa (1989-1992); Z. Masele (1992-1998); S. Bukuku (1999-2005); D. K. Mwambeta (2006-present).

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NOTES

1. "Southern Highlands Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2019), 60.
2. Ibid.
3. Southern Highlands Conference, Secretary's Statistical Report, 4th Quarter, 2008.
4. Ibid.
5. Stefan Hoschele, *Christian Remnant-African Folk Church: Seventh-day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980* (Leiden: IDC Publishers, 2007), 178-186.
6. Elisha A. Okeyo, *Kanisa Safarini Tanzania* (Morogoro: Tanzania Adventist Press, 2014), 59.
7. Ibid., 60.
8. Stefan Hoschele, *Christian Remnant-African Folk Church: Seventh-day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980* (Leiden: IDC Publishers, 2007), 178-186.
9. Interviews with elders Alinanine Mwambogela and Edward Mwaipopo
10. Elisha A. Okeyo, *Kanisa Safarini Tanzania* (Morogoro: Tanzania Adventist Press, 2014), 58-60.
11. "Southern Highlands Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, years 1982-2019, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

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