

# Malawi Adventist Media, SID

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## CHARLES WILFRED THANGALIMODZI

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, M.A. (Lampeter University, Wales, United Kingdom), serves as executive director for Malawi Adventist Media (Hope TV and Adventist Radio). Since 1998, Thangalimodzi has served as a church pastor, Youth, Personal, and Children's Ministries director in Central Malawi Conference. Prior to this, he studied for a B.A. in theology at Newbold College in Berkshire, the U.K. He also earned other qualifications from educational institutions in Malawi and the United Kingdom. For his publication, see:

<http://n10308uk.eos-intl.eu/N10308UK/Common/Pages/GetDoc.aspx?ClientID=MN10308UK&MediaCode=65847369>

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Malawi Adventist Media is an institution owned and operated by the Malawi Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists.

Malawi Adventist Media (MAM) mainly consists of an alliance between Malawi Adventist Radio and Malawi Adventist Television (also known as Hope Channel Malawi). The media institution's focus is to reach the people of the Republic of Malawi and those living in countries bordering with Malawi via internet services. The country of Malawi has a population of 19,081,000 people, of which 558,273 are Adventists.<sup>1</sup>

The official language spoken in Malawi is English, although the main medium of communication is through the Chichewa language (also known as Nyanja). Besides Chichewa, there are also other dialects such as Lhomwe, Yawo, Tumbuka, Sena, Nkhonde, and Tonga which are dominant in their respective areas. MAM's mission is to be a voice of hope in a hopeless world, preparing people for the soon coming of Jesus Christ. Each broadcast is meant to convey hope into people's lives.

## Developments That Led to the Establishment of Malawi Adventist Media

Members of the Seventh Day Baptist denomination<sup>2</sup> established a base in Nyasaland (now Malawi) at a place then known as Plainfield Mission. Although others attest that the Adventist Church in Malawi started in Blantyre in the late 1800s,<sup>3</sup> the Adventist Church bought the Plainfield Mission in 1902 and renamed it Malamulo. Malamulo Mission developed into one of the most significant evangelical, medical, and educational centers for neighboring countries such as Mozambique, Zambia, and Tanzania. The opening of a publishing house in Malawi, and twelve mission stations from 1908 to 1958, including other mission stations such as Mwami in Zambia in 1925, and at Munguluni in Mozambique in 1935, are a result of the hard work of the Africans and foreign missionaries in Malawi.<sup>4</sup>

Ever since the Seventh-day Adventist Church came to Malawi, the most common method of reaching people was through public speaking and the distribution of literature. However, in the 1970s some missionaries began to use media equipment such as visual slides, tapes, and film projectors to educate and evangelize the people. For decades, public evangelism was the principle method of spreading the gospel. However, urbanization slowly changed the dynamics of public gatherings so that in some areas people were no longer attracted to public evangelism as before. Moreover, when television sets became widely available, the interest of the people shifted drastically, necessitating new approaches for evangelism.

## The Development of Media Evangelism in Malawi (1993-2013)

Through their desire to find new ways of reaching the masses of people in cities and villages, Malawian Adventist church members searched for strategies that would reach the people in their own homes via public media. The first televised Bible lesson series used in Malawi were through the satellite evangelism broadcast of 1993 from South Africa, with Fitz Henry as the speaker. The Net 95 satellite broadcast followed, led by evangelist Mark Finley. This time many churches were encouraged to buy satellite dishes for setting up tele-centers, where many gathered to watch and listen to the message.<sup>5</sup>

The last satellite televised evangelistic campaign was conducted in Blantyre in 2009, with Pastor Paul Ratsara as the speaker. This satellite evangelistic campaign was sponsored by the Southern African Indian Ocean Division (SID). Church members were again mobilized to invest in satellite dishes and decoders to watch the televised program, and they realized the potential of media evangelism. It proved to be an efficient way to reach people who would not respond to other methods.<sup>6</sup>

In September 2013, Area 47 Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lilongwe organized a nation-wide evangelistic campaign televised via public media, which was affordable through the use of Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation television studios. Five radio stations were also involved in broadcasting the messages for 21 days, complementing live television broadcasting from the nation's capital city of Lilongwe. More than 3,500 people joined the Adventist church.<sup>7</sup>

## Establishment and History of Malawi Adventist Media - 2006-2019

Malawi Adventist Media began with the establishment of a radio station - Malawi Adventist Radio Station ('Liwu la chiyembekezo' *The Voice of Hope*). The aim was to proclaim the everlasting gospel to all Malawians by producing holistic programming that changed lives for the better.

The desire for the Adventist church in Malawi to own a media institution was initially entertained by many church leaders. At different points, Pastors Wenson Masoka and Benford Malopa, former presidents of Malawi Union Mission, expressed their wishes to establish a media institution, starting with a television station. Some

members of the church recall several attempts to raise funds for the radio station.

Around 2006, when Pastor Saustin Mfuné was president of Malawi Union Mission, all union employees who could sing were encouraged to join a singing group.<sup>8</sup> The group recorded its music at Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation studios, where station staff suggested to Mfuné that the church establish a radio and television station. Mfuné took the suggestion seriously, although he was reminded that Masoka and Malopa efforts had not succeeded. However, Mfuné received advice from a broadcasting expert that to establish a radio station, they first needed to obtain a license from the Government Regulatory Authority.

A group of church members developed a proposal for obtaining the much needed license. Some of the leading members appointed were Benson Tembo and Stanley Elton Nkumba, among many others. The first application submitted was rejected, citing a conflict of interest as the reason for turning it down. Providentially, Mfuné happened to be a member of the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA) board at that time.

Later, Mfuné, D. J. Nkhoma, and W. Zoya held a meeting with the then President of the Republic of Malawi, His Excellence, Dr. Bingu Wa Mutharika. As a result of that meeting the Seventh-day Adventist Church was assured to be granted a broadcasting license within a week. As promised, the Adventist church in Malawi received a radio broadcasting license in 2007 from the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority for operating a radio station for community interest.

The church's radio station was established in the Malawi Union Guest House in the city of Blantyre, where four rooms were made available for the station. Two rooms were reserved for offices, another room for production, and the fourth room was for a broadcasting studio. The radio station was intended to later relocate to Sunnyside, but those plans were abandoned when Malawi Union Mission offices relocated to Lilongwe in 2014.

When the station launched on September 20, 2008, the radio station only had a 1 kilowatt transmitter for reaching the southern region with a frequency of 90.8 FM. The first radio station manager was Kingsley Matiti, supported by four employees and sixteen volunteers. Thereafter, two additional transmitters were added: 106.9 FM to cover the central region, and 100.0 FM to cover the northern region of Malawi. Later, other radio frequencies were also made available, such as 89.8 FM, and 105.5 FM. The frequencies provided coverage of almost all the major towns in Malawi, most of which are densely populated, with fast growing businesses such as manufacturing plants, hotels, tourism, plantations, fisheries, agriculture, and shops.<sup>9</sup>

As of 2019, the radio station operates on five frequencies, covering almost 70 percent of the country. Malawi Adventist Radio also broadcasts on the internet<sup>10</sup>, which for some time was partly funded by Malawians living in the United Kingdom. In the UK, the internet webpage and play-out platforms were hosted by Samuel Chiwanda.

The official inauguration of the station was done by Her Excellency the Vice President of Malawi, Dr. Joyce Banda, supported by Honourable Leckford Mwanza Thotho, Member of Parliament and Minister of Information and Civic Education, in the presence of Dr. Paul Ratsara, President of SID, and Dr. Saustin Mfuné, then President

of Malawi Union Mission. The event received positive press coverage from other media institutions. Malawi Adventist Radio was already affiliated to Adventist World Radio (AWR) in 2007 prior to the official opening event.<sup>11</sup>

## Establishment of the Television Station

In addition to the establishment of the radio station, the Adventist church applied again to the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority for a low-power television license, which was granted in 2010. The license granted enabled the Malawi Adventist church to operate an analog television station. Another task force was formed, led by Benson Tembo. Other task force members were Peter Ntonda, Phaniel Nkhono, Masuko Katsala, Christopher Chibwana Nkhonjera, and Gibson Mbewe, whose assignment was to plan, organize, and raise funds for the purchase of equipment and the establishment of the television station. Unfortunately, the task force faced a challenge in that by December 2013, the church's financial contributions for the television station had not yet reached the required amount. Then the roll-out period expired, and the church faced the risk of losing its license if it was revoked.

However, the Geneva 2006 (GE06) Resolution required that the southern African countries migrate from analog to digital television platforms over a given period.<sup>12</sup> In conjunction with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), June 17, 2015, was set as a deadline for all countries to digitize their television broadcasting programs. Although the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) had designated December 31, 2013, as the deadline for the digital switchover, the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority set December 31, 2014, as its deadline for the transition. These deadline variations afforded the Adventist church in Malawi another 24 months to implement the television roll-out.

The Malawi Union Mission executive committee then bought some used digital broadcasting equipment from SID-Media to be used for a startup since no transmitters would be required. This became an advantage, because the digital broadcasting technology which Malawi had adopted as a standard, DVB - T2 with MPEG 4 Compression, allowed a number of channels to use a single assigned frequency. The Adventist Church's Hope Channel International also came in and provided additional equipment, including staff training. Kandus Thorp, then a vice president for Hope Channel, responsible for development, spent months in Malawi developing the studio so that by August 14, 2014, the Malawi Adventist television station became operational. Thereafter, on February 15, 2015, Honourable Kondwani Nankumwa, Minister of Information, Tourism, and Civic Education, in the presence of Pastors Paul Ratsala, Brad Thorp and Frackson Kuyama, officially inaugurated Hope Channel Malawi Television.<sup>13</sup>

The chairperson of the television board was to be the president of Malawi Union Conference, while the secretary of the board was to be the manager of the station. Other board members appointed were the media's chief financial officer, heads of local conferences in Malawi, the Malawi Union Conference executive secretary, chief financial officer, and three local church members. Hope Channel Malawi Television complimented the

services of the Malawi Radio station, established in 2008, and this led to the formation of a complete media institution. The Malawi Union Conference Executive Committee voted for Malawi Adventist Media to operate as an independent institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Malawi, responsible for all media activities of the church.<sup>14</sup>

It was decided that MAM's main source of income should be through contributions from church members and appropriations from sister institutions within the Malawi Union Conference. Other strategic sources of income include 2% of total monthly tithe income from each of the three conferences in the Malawi Union Conference, including a special collection offering the first week of every month. There are also other special donations from within and outside Malawi.

The Malawi Adventist Media logo depicts a combination of both the radio and television. Both the radio and television stations operate under the same administrative officers. The first executive director (manager) of the media institution is Charles Thangalimodzi, who took over from Kingsley Matiti. Some employees who played a major role were Gift Kalulu, who has served as a technical leader since 2008, and Henry Somanje, the executive producer for both television and radio programs. The first chief financial officer is Bictory Safuna.

## Malawi Adventist Media Services

Malawi Adventist Media Services became a platform for live presentations of evangelistic meetings and sermons, and for producing programs gospel on social media, reports, and documentaries. Media services are designed to help viewers and listeners to come closer to God. The priority of the media station is to operate effectively through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to champion community development programs with practical and measurable goals. Therefore, the stations enshrine the teaching of Christ-centered moral principles and provide effective community support programs to all Malawians.<sup>15</sup>

All programs are designed to enrich the lives of viewers and listeners with Christian values, and the community support programs are designed to address various social problems and promote better living standards. Therefore, it is Adventist Media's key agenda to enhance healthful living, fighting domestic violence, corruption, poverty, and HIV-AIDS through empowerment campaigns and other measures.

The media produces programs to teach Malawians biblical approaches to effectively address critical social needs. These spiritual programs include evangelism, Bible studies, documentaries, special Bible presentations, music, family life, and youth and children programs. Social programs are also produced for life-changing experiences in health, education, and many more. Most programs are produced in Chichewa to target the majority of the Malawian population, while a few programs are produced in English.<sup>16</sup>

## Advantages of Media Impact

Malawi Adventist Media has played a leading role in comparison with other media institutions, especially in urban areas. Both radio and television have been effective mediums helping millions of people improve their lives. People receive the message of hope, and have also been helped to reassert themselves by having their voices heard. Malawi Adventist Media has enjoyed the following advantages:

Distance is no longer considered a barrier to reach people in their houses.

Through television and radio programs, people have learned about the Adventist health message.

Short television and radio messages are convenient for people using mobile phones.

Media allows people to worship even when they fail to attend church.

There has been mass promotion of products, Sabbath lesson guides, and books, including promotion of meetings.

Malawi Adventist Media has helped reduce event costs. One well-organized evangelistic campaign can be preached and duplicated to many centers without actually making individual meetings.

Malawi Adventist Media has led to a diffusion of different cultures. Media showcases different cultural practices, helping people understand each other and embrace their differences.

Media has reduced the level of prejudice towards the Adventist church.

## Production and Operations of the Media Institution

Malawi Adventist Media operates with 21 workers, including ten part-time employees. Each undergoes training in as many functions as possible, building teamwork. The current organizational structure promotes a united front. Many of the functions are done by many people on the same level. Every six months the media house provides job training to internees from different universities in Malawi.

In 2008 the radio station broadcast for 12 hours a day, a total of 84 hours a week. The station was open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. daily. Later, broadcasting hours were adjusted to 24 hours, of which 8:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. was dedicated to auto programming. Over time, the station schedule was altered following a donation of a vehicle from Thom Mpingajira. Both the radio and television operate on a 24-hour schedule, with local programs running from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. every day. The television shifts to Hope Channel International every 9:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. everyday, whereas the radio shifts to auto programming, which only play music and sermons.

Programs are generally 30 minutes long, except for a few such as documentaries, sermons, and special live programs that run 60 minutes. The station carefully identified Christian music, and spiced it up with

international gospel music to suit a wide range of modern listeners. Programming also includes financial and business programs, documentaries, academic lectures, and sermons preached by local and international speakers that satisfy listeners' needs. Through its quality spiritual and community programs, Malawi Adventist Media attracts millions of listeners in Malawi and beyond. With this high listenership among religious stations in Malawi, MAM remains a leading platform for programs on spiritual matters. It is for this reason that major organizations such as businesses, schools, manufacturing companies, and non-governmental organizations like UNICEF, the Malawi Electoral Commission, The Story Workshop, Nation Aids Commission, and ADRA work with the Adventist media.<sup>17</sup>

MAM broadcasts other issues of national interest. It does not broadcast any material that promotes discrimination of individuals or groups on the basis of race, sex, age, mental or physical ability, or hatred against religious affiliations. MAM also does not broadcast any programs whose principles contradict the moral standards of Adventism. This includes programs that may be suspected to contain any evil intent or motives. The Media does not engage itself in politics or align itself with any political party. Rather, it produces programs promoting physical and mental health, education, spiritual life, social economic support, and advocacy programs, including those that promote domestic violence awareness, youth development, and women empowerment.

MAM aims to serve all age groups to improve their spiritual lives and the social and healthful living standards of the people of Malawi. Therefore, the media house targets the working class, motorists, academicians and students, youths, all Christians, and non-believers.

The tenth anniversary celebration of the radio station was held July 13, 2019, at the COMESA Hall in Blantyre. Attendees gave testimonies of the impact the radio programs had on their lives.

## Challenges and Changes

Despite numerous achievements since its establishment, MAM has faced many challenges that have affected its growth. Insufficient funding has been one of outstanding challenges. Funding for all operations of the media house has come from church offerings. At first each member of the Adventist Church in Malawi was to contribute a minimum of Mk100.00 (US\$ 0.74) per month. Assuming all members contributed each month, the amount was supposed to sustain the media house for two months. When this plan fell short, the Malawi Union Conference mandated each local conference to contribute 1% of total monthly tithe, which it later adjusted to 2% in January 2016. Malawi Union Conference sourced its monthly appropriation from its annual budget. The large portion of this fund is used to settle monthly bills for tower rentals, licenses, and monthly wages for the media house.

Another challenge faced by the media house is the cost of developing programs. There is inadequate content. There are not enough contributors to the preaching and teaching programs, which prompts the program

presenters to venture into hiring contributors. As a result, programming costs continue to grow.

Another outstanding challenge is the scarcity of upgraded equipment. The media has been operating with old equipment which often requires frequent repairs, and is sometimes incompatible with new systems on the platform. International donors such as Hope Channel International and Adventist World Radio have enabled Malawi Adventist Media to purchase new equipment.

Another challenge is frequent power blackouts. In sub-Saharan Africa, Malawi's energy sector is one of the most severely constrained. It is estimated that less than 10% of Malawi's 19 million people are supplied with electricity, while 80% of the rural population have less than 1% access. With such an unreliable power connection, the media center spends a lot on electric power backup systems.<sup>18</sup>

## Future Outlook

Malawi Adventist Media plans to fulfill the following objectives in its near future:

To increase the number of viewers and listeners. The development of broadcasting projects that reflect Malawian excellence for the consumption of local, regional, and international audiences remains their goal.

To have adequate financial resources to fund the institution's programs through increased church sponsorship and donor support.

To increase the production of programs that focus on quality of life and present programs that have a contemporary look and feel.

To continue connecting our viewers to local Seventh-day Adventist churches.

To continue expanding multi-platform for biblical enriching experiences, such as using online television.

To continue creating and producing programs which feature the distinctive doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

To increase partnerships with entities that support their mission.

To continue producing resources for educators.

To decrease the percentage of repeated program content.

Malawi Adventist Media is also planning to relocate from Blantyre to Lilongwe where Malawi Union office buildings are being constructed.<sup>19</sup> Currently the media institution is located in a building that used to be a guest house. The building was never designed for a radio studio, although the rooms were modified to accommodate the station. Another reason for the planned relocation is that the media institution is right now situated inside hospital premises of Blantyre Adventist Hospital.



The buildings under construction in Lilongwe are specifically designed for television and radio studios, as well as offices for the media institution. Moreover, the media institution will operate from a central location in Malawi for reaching the north and south and eastern regions. After relocating, the Blantyre office will have a small studio for audio recordings similar to the one now operating in the northern region.

## List of Directors

Kingsley Matiti (2008-2013); Charles Thangalimodzi (2014-present).

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