

Kristensen, Thorvald (1909–2000)

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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.

In his service for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Thorvald Kristensen inspired a number of people and left his appreciable impression on the work of the Church in Denmark and West Africa. He worked as Bible teacher, evangelist, pastor, administrator, missionary, and editor. By his side was his faithful wife, Irene, with her pleasant attitude and dignified manners. In his autobiography he very appropriately uses the subtitle, "My Life Under God's Guidance."¹

Early Life

Thorvald Johannes Kristensen was born on October 2, 1909, in Nyborg (Newcastle), Denmark. His life was under God's protection and guidance right from the day when, as a 4 year-old, he fell into Nyborg Harbor and was miraculously rescued.² He received seven years of elementary schooling before he started working on his uncle's farm. After about a year, he joined his father on his fishing boat "fishing" for stones to be used to build ferry berths, groynes, and breakwaters. It was hard work. Some of the stones weighed 1 to 3 tons and loading and unloading were done by winch.³ Living in a port city and seeing the ferries daily crossing Storebælt (the Great Belt) from Funen to Zealand, he had a great childhood dream to one day become a captain on one of these ferries.



Thorvald Kristensen

Photo courtesy of the Historic Archive of Seventh-day Adventists (HASDA) in Denmark.

A Turning Point

Although Kristensen lived in a secure and happy home, the family did not regularly attend church nor had any particular emphasis on religion. His mother taught the children the Lord's Prayer. But this changed when the family received and read Adventist literature and then attended a camp meeting in the nearby larger city of Odense. Their interest was ignited, and after some evangelistic meetings in Nyborg, Kristensen's parents were baptized and joined the Adventist Church. Great changes followed in the home. Faith in Christ became central in their life, and his elder brother, Svend, shortly after also joined the Church and enrolled at the mission school at Nærum, later continuing his education in the physiotherapy course at Skodsborg Sanitarium. But Thorvald had other plans. He wanted to realize his childhood dreams.⁴

One day, however, he overheard his mother's earnest prayer through a half-opened door. His name was mentioned and her prayer for his conversion stuck with him. In a copy of *Steps to Christ* from 1919 he had written: "The first religious book I received from my mother."⁵ As the understanding of God's word became clearer and he saw how people around him changed, a desire to follow Jesus grew in his heart. But no one spoke to him about baptism. One day, when he returned home, there was a letter from the conference president, Chr. Resen, who had been instrumental in leading his parents to Christ. Pastor Resen asked in the letter: Was it not time for Thorvald to make his decision to follow Jesus? There would soon be a baptism in Ebenezer Church in Copenhagen, and he was welcome to join.⁶ Thorvald made his decision and was baptized on November 25, 1925.⁷

His newfound faith gave him a new perspective on life. He enrolled in the mission school at Nærum the following year and continued when the school moved to Daugaard Strand at Vejle fjord in October 1930. Altogether he spent four years (1927-1931) preparing to be a fisher of men.⁸

Working in Denmark

His first work assignment for the Church from 1931 was as a part-time assistant for one of the evangelists in the West Denmark Conference. The rest of his time he was expected to canvass. However, the evangelist had meetings scheduled for three different towns every week and kept Thorvald Kristensen so busy that there was no time for canvassing. He had to live on his very meager budget. As he worked leading a family to Christ and saw the joy of people accepting the Savior into their lives, he made the decision that soulwinning should be his lifetime career. In the summer months of 1933 and 1935, he studied at Newbold College, which is based outside Rugby, England. Between these study times, he assisted two other successful preachers and, eventually in 1936, he was assigned his own church district in Jutland and commenced his own evangelistic series. In Skagen, the northernmost town in Denmark, he planted a new church. While working in Frederikshavn, he married physiotherapist Irene Ella Jordal (1910-1987) on December 31, 1938. They were called to work in Viborg soon after, and he held an evangelistic series there.

The conflict of World War II had begun in Europe, and on April 9, 1940, Denmark was invaded by the German Wehrmacht. That same day, the Sabbath services were scheduled to be in a certain hotel where Kristensen was running his meetings. But the Germans entered the hotel and occupied it, so admittance was prohibited. The services moved to Kristensen's small two-room apartment. At the camp meeting for the conference in 1940, he was ordained to the gospel ministry.⁹

Shortly after his ordination Kristensen was called to be Bible teacher at Vejlefyord Højskole (Vejlefyord High School), where he taught from 1940 to 1946.¹⁰ As the evangelist that he was at heart, he was keen to give his students a solid foundation in Bible knowledge, but also wanted to train them in giving Bible studies and experiencing the joy of soulwinning. Therefore, he included an extra one-year class after the three years Preliminary Course with the normal subjects: Danish, Mathematics, History, English, German, Bible, etc. It would be a Mission Class preparing young people for service for the Lord.¹¹ Although the interest among the students was great, the school board was not willing to implement the program due to financial concerns. However, in Thorvald Kristensen's own words, "When you believe in an idea, you will not be stopped by a bit of adversity." At the end of the school year, he invited the graduates to come back after the summer holidays and join the new Mission Class. The board was not pleased, but eventually it gave in, and the Mission Class gained great support and had success. It was during the war years when meetings in public halls were not possible. Instead, in the nearby city of Vejle, Kristensen held his evangelistic meetings in the church, and the students from the Mission Class assisted. He trained them to give Bible studies and prepare sermons. The Mission Class was later extended to be for two years, and it continued for many years. Several of the young men attending became preachers, and the young women Bible workers.¹² A younger colleague expressed it this way: "Through diligence and love for the youth and the progress of God's cause, Thorvald Kristensen with the mighty movements of God's Spirit created a group of young preachers and church leaders all over the country. He worked determinedly. His bright dreams became a reality."¹³

After Vejlefyord followed a year of studies at Columbia Theological Seminary in the U.S. Kristensen had to leave his wife and four-year-old daughter behind, and they lived with her parents. While studying, he received an invitation to return home and be the principal of Vejlefyord Højskole, but he responded that his training was preparing him for evangelism and pastoral work rather than a career in education. He didn't hear anything else until he arrived home, and his wife told him that he had been elected the new president for the West Denmark Conference.¹⁴

Thorvald Kristensen was president for the conference with headquarters in Aarhus for seven years (1947-1954). In addition, he served as pastor for the local church, and through all seven years, he held public evangelistic campaigns in the city and in some neighboring cities.

Right after the conclusion of the War, people were unsure about the future. In the advertisement for the opening meeting the first winter, the question was asked: *The Future of the World in God's Council – Are We on the*

Way to God's Kingdom or Perdition? Attendance was good, and many were added to the Church from year to year.

Another challenge Kristensen took up was the lack of church buildings.¹⁵ His older friend, Emanuel W. Pedersen at the General Conference, later wrote: "Home in Denmark Thorvald was a pioneer when it comes to church building."¹⁶

In 1954, Kristensen was called to be president for the East Denmark Conference, with headquarters in Copenhagen, where he was to serve for another seven years (1954-1961). Here he repeated his strategy with public evangelistic meetings every year and church building projects. The result was that the churches grew under his leadership.¹⁷ "By the grace of God and the help of my faithful assistants," as he expressed it, about 300 new members were added to the Church through his evangelistic efforts.¹⁸ In his autobiography, he mentioned the many committees he was a member of, and in all his endeavors, he gave due credit to his good co-workers and assistants.¹⁹

Africa Is Calling

In 1961, a call came from the Northern European Division for Thorvald Kristensen to be president for the West African Union Mission. The mission region covered a territory about 47 times the size of his homeland Denmark. There were about 400 tribes, each with their own language, dialect, and customs – and their own African traditional religion.²⁰ The headquarters of the Union Mission was in Accra, Ghana, and the Union was composed of 10 developing countries or territories organized in seven Missions with a membership of 24,696.²¹ Four countries had not yet entered: Gambia, Togo, Dahomi, and Burkino Faso.²² With no overseas experience, Kristensen took up the new challenges by faith. God, who had guided him so far, would surely supply him with the wisdom and strength he needed.

He had good co-workers, many of them already on site, when he arrived. Others were to be called and local nationals needed to be trained. One of his goals was to give the nationals the best possible education and train as many as possible for leadership so that they could take over from the missionaries and likewise be qualified to work in the world Church. He was one of the first to hand over leadership to his African brothers and sisters. In this he succeeded to a great degree.²³ There were many challenges in the very different and sometimes unstable countries of the Union Mission. His daughter, Inge, recalls a special situation when he had to travel to Nigeria after the Biafra War (1967-1970),²⁴ to commence the great search to find the pastors that had fled into the countryside and find them again, so that they could continue their work for the mission.²⁵

At his side, his wife Irene was a great support and served as treasurer for the local church in Accra, was organist for the church and the choir, and was hostess at all the board meetings in the West African Union. Together with the other missionary wives, she took care of accommodation and feeding of the many visitors.²⁶ After 15 years of Kristensen's leadership for the Adventist Church in West Africa, the organization had grown to become two

Union Missions (Nigerian and West African) comprising 11 Conferences and Missions with a total membership of 67,757.²⁷ A threefold growth in members, along with entrance into new countries and territories, a strengthening of mission institutions and opening of new ones.

In his autobiography Kristensen vividly, and with affection, describes each country, mission, institution, and his travels around the union and the people he met. No doubt these years were a very important and welcome part of his life of service for the Lord.²⁸ Describing his work in Africa a Danish newspaper wrote, "The Africans loved him."²⁹ After a short term as pastor for the Adventist Church in Copenhagen (1976-1977), he was called back, at the age of 68, to serve as interim president for the Nigerian Union Mission (1977-1978) until a new president was found.³⁰

Retirement and Editor

After he and his wife returned to Denmark, there were suggestions that he work for the Division or serve as a conference president in Denmark. However, having reached retirement age, he instead accepted an invitation to be the editor for *Adventnyt*, the church paper for Denmark. This work he could do from his home in Strøby Egede. And this he did until December 1985 when edited paper no. 90 which was his last.³¹

Literature and Legacy

Thorvald Kristensen wrote several articles in church papers and a series of 20 evangelistic pamphlets.³² His first book, *Evigheden banker på (Eternity Is Knocking)*, was written in 1957 for the audience in Denmark and gives a natural and fervent introduction to the gospel with Christ at the center. In 1972, the Advent Publishing House in Accra published his *Life Worth Living* for the congregations in Africa. Then in 1995 came his autobiography *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker (From Fisher of Stones to Fisher of Men)* telling the exciting story of a man who dedicated his life to be used by God in leading men and women to Christ and building his end-time church.³³ This last book was dedicated to his wife, "Irene, without her faithfulness the content of this book would not have been possible."³⁴ And in another place, "Irene, an invaluable help to me."³⁵

He considered himself first and foremost a preacher of the gospel. His preaching was Christ-centered,³⁶ and he emphasized to his young workers in seminars and in courses the importance of preaching Christ and the cross. He influenced a generation of young people by his example and by his words to become involved in the mission of the Church both in Denmark and in West Africa. Even as editor of the church paper, he insisted that each issue should have an article about Christian beliefs with Jesus at the center.³⁷ He was an inspiration and a help to many.

Grymer, Mette, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 14, 2000.

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Kristensen, Thorvald. *Evigheden banker på (Eternity Is Knocking)*. Odense: Dansk Bogforlag, 1957.

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<https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

NOTES

1. Thorvald Kristensen, *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker, Mit liv under Guds ledelse (From Fisher of Stones to Fisher of Men, My Life Under God's Guidance)*, Nærum: Dansk Bogforlag, 1995.
2. Kaj Pedersen, "En missionsadministrator ser tilbage" ("A Mission Administrator Looks Back"), Børge Schantz and Hans Jørgen Schantz, *Var det umagen værd? (Was It Worth the Effort?)*, Nærum: Dansk Bogforlag, 1999, 139.
3. Kristensen, 15-16.
4. Ibid., 17-18.
5. Information by mail from his daughter, Inge Kjeldal, received July 25, 2021.
6. Kristensen, 20-22.
7. Hans Jørgen Schantz, *I troens bakspejl (In the Rear-View Mirror of Faith)*, Nærum: Dansk Bogforlag, 1998, 79.
8. Kristensen, 24-27.
9. Ibid., 28-32.
10. Hans Jørgen Schantz, *I troens bakspejl*, 79.

11. Because of the War, the borders were closed, and ministerial students were not able to travel to England and attend Newbold College.
12. Kristensen, 33-36.
13. Pedersen, 139-140.
14. Kristensen, 37-39.
15. Ibid., 40-44.
16. Ibid., 9.
17. Ibid., 45-49.
18. Thorvald Kristensen, *Autobiographical Information*, HASDA, April 3, 1988. Accessed June 9, 2021.
19. Kristensen, *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker*, 46-47.
20. Pedersen, 140-141.
21. "West African Union Mission", *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962), 152.
22. Pedersen, 140.
23. Mette Grymer, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 14, 2000.
24. A civil war was fought between the government of Nigeria and the secessionist state of Biafra.
25. Information by mail from Inge Kjeldal, received July 25, 2021.
26. Ibid.
27. "West African Union Mission," "Nigerian Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 239, 235.
28. Kristensen, *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker*, 50-169.
29. Mette Grymer, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 14, 2000.
30. Schantz, 79.

31. Kristensen, *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker*, 172.
32. Kristensen, *Autobiographical Information*, HASDA, April 3, 1988. Accessed June 9, 2021.
33. Schantz, 80-83.
34. Kristensen, *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker*, 3.
35. Kristensen, *Autobiographical Information*, HASDA, April 3, 1988. Accessed June 9, 2021.
36. Schantz, Memorial sermon, "Th. Kristensen in memoriam," *Adventnyt*, July 2000, 22-24. Citation from Th. Kristensen, "There are three firm fixed points that provide the background for our lives and all our existence: The Fall – the door to heaven was closed. The Cross – vi received a future and a hope. The Second Advent – where man again shall be with God." (*Evigheden banker på*, 32).
37. Kristensen, *Fra stenfisker til menneskefisker*, 172.

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