



Rwanda Union Mission Office.

Photo courtesy of Rwanda Union Mission Office.

# Rwanda Union Mission

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## NGABO BIRIKUNZIRA JEROME

Ngabo Birikunzira Jerome

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Rwanda<sup>1</sup> Union Mission is part of the East-Central Africa Division. In 2019, the membership was 972,966 in eight local fields: the East Central Rwanda Conference, the North Rwanda Conference, the North-West Rwanda Field, the West Rwanda Field, the Central Rwanda Field, the South Rwanda Field, North-East Rwanda Field, and the South-East Rwanda Field. Altogether, the entities are comprised of 257 districts and 2,547 churches?<sup>2</sup> As of 2019, Rwanda Union was the largest union in the East-Central Africa Division in terms of membership.

The Rwanda Union runs several institutions including Gitwe Adventist College, Mugonero Hospital at Ngoma (which was founded in 1931 by Dr. John Hubert Struges), two dental clinics in Kigali, and the Literature Ministry Seminary (LMS) in Kigali, which was established in 1989 by H. Skoggins, then union publishing director. On

March 10, 2005, the Voice of Hope Radio, owned by the union, started broadcasting from the Literature Ministry Seminary. In 2014, the East-Central Africa Division relinquished the running of the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA) to the Rwanda Union. Currently the university has three campuses: Masoro (main campus), Gishushu (science and technology campus) in the city of Kigali, and Ngoma (the nursing campus) in Karongi. On March 25, 2019, the union restarted a diploma level ministerial training at Gitwe<sup>3</sup> in order to solve the problem of the high member to pastor ratio.

## The Organizational History of Rwanda Union Mission

After the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rwanda and Burundi, the field was put under the European Division. In January 1929, this field was moved to the African Division.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, it was decided to form the East Congo Union Mission composed of the provinces of Kivu (Congo), Rwanda, and Burundi with headquarters at Gitwe, Rwanda. C. W. Bozarth was appointed the first superintendent. The new mission started with three mission stations, thirty-one day-schools (these schools were established in different churches and offered classes to teach people basic reading and writing skills), 171 baptized members, 114 people preparing for baptism, 2,061 Sabbath School members, and 2,417 pupils enrolled in schools.<sup>5</sup> Among other decisions, was the involvement of every worker in evangelism. Camp meetings and medical work were organized. Lay people trained by the missionaries conducted crusades and meetings. Their testimonies greatly contributed to the expansion of the Adventist faith and to the growth of the Church. The faithful believers very often told their families and the people of their villages about the satisfaction they had found through the Christian faith. The changes in their daily lives influenced their neighbors and friends to accept the Adventist faith. Thus, the Adventist message was transmitted from one person to another and from village to village. In 1934, the first Rwandan pastors, Moses Segatwa, Daniel Kagegera, and Eleazar Semutwa were ordained to the ministry.<sup>6</sup> They did not receive any theological training but were fully committed to the Lord and to His work.

In 1960, the Adventist Church experienced much growth in the region, especially in Rwanda which reached 20,247 members<sup>7</sup> at Gitwe alone. This made it necessary to form a Rwanda-Burundi Union. In 1961, these two countries were removed from the East Congo Union and reorganized as the Central African Union with headquarters in Bujumbura, Burundi. W. R. Vail was appointed the first president. The membership in Rwanda was ninety percent of the new union.<sup>8</sup> In Rwanda in the same year, three fields were operating: the South Rwanda Field based at Gitwe and led by E. Schultz, the North Rwanda Field in Rwankeri and led by H. Kotz, and the West Rwanda Field in Ngoma led by J. G. Matingly. Moving the union headquarters from Gitwe to Bujumbura was influenced by the fact that Bujumbura was the seat of the Belgian colonial political administration of Rwanda-Burundi. Lake Tanganyika in Burundi also facilitated communication and transportation for missionaries between their countries of origin and their mission stations.

In 1980, Rwanda was transferred from Trans Africa Division to the Africa Indian Ocean Division. In 1984, the church in Rwanda grew tremendously reaching 142,381 church members. Therefore, it was organized into the Rwanda Union Mission. Robert G. Peck was the first president, Nathanael Musaza, the executive secretary, and Seraya Mbangukira, the treasurer.<sup>9</sup> The union was composed of the same three Rwandan fields. In 1989, R. G. Peck was replaced by Leitao, who left Rwanda in 1994 following the genocide against Tutsi and moderate Hutus taking the lives of more than one million people, including an unknown number of Adventist church members, pastors, and other workers. This disrupted the Adventist work and all activities were suspended. In 1995, the union resumed work, but nearly had to start from nothing. Lay church members and Adventist returnees from neighboring countries played an important role in rebuilding the church spiritually and physically. Carl Wilkens, then country ADRA director who had played an important role in saving people's lives during the genocide at the risk of being killed, helped the union to start anew.<sup>10</sup>

The General Conference Session of 1995, which took place at Utrecht in Holland from June 26 to July 8, 1995, was attended by Rwanda delegates. During this session, Luka Daniel was elected president of the division, replacing J. J. Norty. The division session, which took place at Abidjan in Ivory Coast the same year, elected Amon Rugelinyange as the first Rwandan Union Mission president, Elie Mbuguje, executive secretary, and Samuel Bimenyimana, treasurer. The Church had been wounded by the genocide and its consequences, so it was very difficult for the members to worship together again. Thus, the new team of leaders focused on reconciliation between church members.<sup>11</sup>

In 2002, the General Conference set up a commission chaired by Lowell Cooper to study the possibility of having a third division in Africa. The commission recommended the establishment of the East-Central Africa Division to be based in Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>12</sup> In the reorganization that resulted, the Rwanda Union Mission became part of the new division which officially opened in 2003.<sup>13</sup> In 2005, Hesron Byiringiro was elected president of the union, replacing Amon Rugelinyange who retired. The number of fields increased from three to five: the East Rwanda Field, the Central Rwanda Field, the West Rwanda Field, the South Rwanda Field, and the North Rwanda Field.

Six years later two fields were restructured when the East Rwanda Field was divided into two in 2011. It became East Central Rwanda Field, while the newly born entity was named the East Rwanda Field with headquarters at Kayonza. Dan Ngamiye, Jean Pierre Rukundo, and Ntampaka Reuben were elected its officers respectively. The North Rwanda Field with 120,583 members was also restructured. Part of its original territory became the North-West Rwanda Field with headquarters at Rubavu. Its officers were Setako Sophonie, president; Athanase Ngarambe, executive secretary; and Gapira Christophe, treasurer. The new field started with 55,935 church members.<sup>14</sup>

## Total Member Involvement (TMI) in Evangelism

In 2016, the General Conference and the Rwandan Union Mission organized a special evangelism event in Rwanda, called Total Member Involvement, between May 13 and 28. The event was led by the General Conference president, Ted Wilson, included evangelists from America, Europe, and Africa. Every church member was involved in one way or another. It proved to be the most successful evangelism program of the worldwide Adventist Church to date, resulting in more than 110,000 people being baptized. Subsequently, it undoubtedly led to a near crisis in the local churches which lacked facilities, pastors, and programs to nurture the new members. Consequently, fifty-four pastors were ordained after a seminar in Nyamata, Bugesera District, on June 3, 2017.<sup>15</sup> Church leaders and church members worked together for the erection of new church buildings to accommodate the new members.

## New Fields

Due to increasing evangelism in the Eastern Province of Rwanda and the desire to decentralize administration of the mission field, in 2017 the East Rwanda Field in Kayonza was divided into two new fields: the North-East Rwanda Field (NERF) in Nyagatare with Ngamije Dan, president; Niyomugaba Etienne, treasurer; and Rukundo Isaïe, executive secretary; and the South-East Rwanda Field (SERF) in Ngoma with Ngirinshuti Samuel, president; Ngirabatware Samuel, treasurer; and Ngerero Fidele, executive secretary. As of 2020, the Rwanda Union Mission had eight fields.

Translation of the Bible and other materials into Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda, was a significant factor facilitating evangelism in the country. In order to enable church members to read the Spirit of Prophecy books and others in their own language, the union leadership translated twenty-eight of Ellen G. White's books. The number of hymns translated into Kinyarwanda increased to 350 and translation continues.<sup>16</sup>

## Infrastructural Development

The church in Rwanda embarked on a rebranding in 2000. Offices in various fields constructed new buildings. The new East Central Rwanda Conference moved into its own office. The Rwanda Union Mission built a magnificent nine-story building in Nyarugenge, in the center of Kigali City. It operates on some floors while others generate income through rent. In all fields, representative office buildings have been constructed. Where the fields are new, office buildings are under construction.

The Central Rwanda Field relocated from Gitwe to Muhanga where a new office building was constructed. The North Rwanda Field headquarters moved from Rwankeri to Musanze. The East Central Rwanda Conference in Kigali built offices in Nyarutarama and relocated there from Nyamirambo. The new North-West Rwanda Field moved into purchased office premises in the town of Rubavu and renovated them. With the unity between the church members and the church leadership, there are over 2,000 construction projects going on in the Rwanda Union Mission. In addition, ADRA Rwanda rehabilitated and expanded a house at Kacyiru for its offices.

On August 31, 2019, the Rwanda Union Mission celebrated 100 years of the presence of the Seventh-day Adventists in Rwanda.<sup>17</sup> The progress made by the Adventist Church in this country is tremendous, fulfilling the motto "In the hands of the Lord." The Rwanda Union Mission is determined to move forward by faith, to prepare all Rwandans for the very soon coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Colonialists were probably not able to pronounce the word "Rwanda." Therefore, they used Ruanda instead. Likewise, they used Usumbura for Bujumbura.
2. Rwanda Union Statistical Report, December 31, 2019.
3. The school was founded by F. M. Robinson in 1931, reinforced by Hans in 1969, but later on closed.
4. E. D. Dick, "Meetings in the Central African Union Mission," *African Division Outlook*, June 13, 1929, 6-7.
5. Ibid.
6. Z. Mukecuru, a retired pastor and former secretary of Henri Minnier, interview by the author, March 17, 2005.
7. *Huguka Ibihe Bih'Ibindi* of 1958, Vol.1, No 1, p.3.
8. F. Unger, "Central African Union," *Trans-Africa Division Outlook*, August 15, 1965, 9.

9. "Rwanda Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985), 42.
10. Personal knowledge of the author who is a Munyarwanda.
11. Tutsis were slaughtered in church buildings by their fellow church members. It was, therefore, very difficult to reunite killers and survivors of the genocide.
12. It was composed of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, and later on South Sudan.
13. The division started with 2,058,216 church members. The first elected president was Mbwana Geoffrey, with Ruguri Blasious, executive secretary, and S. Ferrer, treasurer.
14. Athanase Ngarambe, telephone interview by the author, March 10, 2020.
15. Personal knowledge of the author who was present at the ordination ceremony.
16. Personal knowledge of the author.
17. The first missionaries arrived in Rwanda in 1919 from Belgium and Switzerland.
18. Personal knowledge of the author.

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