

# Yangon Central Church

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## KENNETH H. SUANZANANG

Kenneth H. Suanzanang worked as a teacher, evangelist, ordained pastor, school principal, ADRA director, district administrator, mission president, and union communication/public affairs and religious liberty/legal director. He retired in 2009. His wife, Lian Za Dim, and their three children live in Yangon, Myanmar. Suanzanang continues to be active in his church. Under Suanzanang's leadership, a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Health and ADRA was signed on July 20, 1993, and the Declaration of Ownership of Trade Marks of the Adventist Church—the logo and typeface—was registered on August 28, 2007. He received an Award of Merit from Adventist World Radio in December 2009 and the General Conference Communication Department's NET Award in May 2011. Suanzanang has written one book, *The Gospel Echo from Genesis*.

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The Yangon Central Seventh-day Adventist church was the first congregation to be organized in Burma (now Myanmar).

## Background

The history of Christianity in Myanmar predates the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination by fifty years. Adoniram Judson landed in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) on July 13, 1813.<sup>1</sup> Establishing the First Baptist church in Mawlamyine (formerly Moulmein) in 1927,<sup>2</sup> he completed his translation of the Bible into the Burmese language on January 31, 1834. After revisions, the entire Burmese Bible was published on October 24, 1840. By contrast, Adventist missionaries did not enter Myanmar until after mission work was started in India in 1895.<sup>3</sup>

## The First Ever in Myanmar

In 1900, Daw May, a member of the First Baptist church, came to believe in the seventh-day Sabbath by studying her Bible.<sup>4</sup> She convinced her younger brother, U Maung Maung, who lived in Yangon and worked at a government office.<sup>5</sup> In 1902, self-supporting missionaries, Herbert B. Meyers and A. G. Watson, came from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) to Myanmar as colporteurs. They rented a house at 110 Brooking (now Bogale Zay) Street in Yangon until December 1906.<sup>6</sup> The first Sabbath School was conducted in their cramped apartment. H. B. Meyers's wife, Ellen Meyers, opened the first school with eighteen pupils.<sup>7</sup> When the Meyerses met Daw May in 1902, she was already keeping the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, the Meyers studied with U Mg Mg, and soon he too began to observe the Sabbath even though it cost him his job in the government office.<sup>9</sup> He attended an Adventist general meeting in late 1904 and requested a missionary be sent to Myanmar (then Burma).<sup>10</sup>

## Mission Superintendent Arrives

The General Conference promptly responded to Myanmar's call. In January 1905, the first superintendent for Myanmar, Herbert H. Votaw and his wife, Carolyn Harding, arrived in Yangon from America. They served the Church until 1914.<sup>11</sup> Lawrence F. and Lydia E. Hansen arrived from Calcutta a few days after the Votaws' arrival. They were to assist the Votaws. Several people were already keeping the Sabbath when they arrived in Myanmar.<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Hansen was a nurse and his wife Lydia was a teacher who served in Myanmar for two years until December 1906.<sup>13</sup>

## First Fruits During 1902-1905

The first converts in Myanmar were Daw May, U Maung Maung, Daw Thein May, Esther, U Myat Htoon, Walter Martin, and Arthur Isacke. U Maung Maung, Esther, and Walter Martin became workers for the Church.<sup>14</sup> Arthur Isacke, who had a wife and two children to support, worked at a large British Insurance Company in Yangon. He requested that Votaw prayed for him before he met his Scottish supervisor to request Sabbath off. It was Friday. The supervisor took an entire week to think, and the next Friday he granted Isacke his request. The supervisor explained that anyone who was willing to risk starving in order to stay faithful to God would be honest and dedicated to his work at the firm. A few months later, Isacke was promoted to management of the Mandalay Branch.<sup>15</sup>

## Meeting Places

The first Adventist meeting place in Yangon was at 110 Brooking Street, rented by the Meyers from 1902 to 1906. The second, from 1905 to 1928, was at Cowasjee Terrace, on the corner of Maha Bandoola (formerly Montgomery) and Seikkantha (formerly Lewis) Streets. The third was at 68 U Wisara (formerly 30 Voyle) Road.<sup>16</sup>

## Mission Quarters

At first, Herbert H. Votaw rented a house at Gremon Slopers in Insein. According to Pe Yee, it seems that the Votaws next rented a house at 60 Vinton Road near the present Ahlone Adventist church; however, according to the 1907 mission report, the congregation met at 60 Lower Kemmendine Road. The house was considered haunted by local people and the rent was cheap. It was occupied until 1915. Nothing else was stated about mission quarters until 1928, thus the mission office at Cowasjee Terrace (see below) may have also been used for a meeting place.<sup>17</sup>

## The Hansens Help Open Doors

Hansen offered his services to the government medical offices at the Secretariat in Yangon wherever and whenever needed. In early 1906, Hansen was called to Government House. Lady White, the wife of Sir Thirkell

White, lieutenant governor of Myanmar, had fallen from her horse and suffered a severely sprained ankle. The Prince of Wales (later King George V) was coming to Myanmar, and Lady White would have to entertain this royal guest, so that ankle just had to get well and quickly. Colonel Davis sent for the Hansens, and their “hot and cold” hydrotherapy treatments soon healed the ankle and made grateful and lasting friends for the new Adventist mission. They received permission to use the Hall of Cowasjee Terrace at the corner of Mahabandoola and Seikantha Street in Yangon for a meeting place until 1928 when the mission bought a lot on 68 U Wisara Road.<sup>18</sup>

## The First Church Organized in Yangon

In 1905, Votaw baptized Po Hla, Chit Hla, Daw May, Maung Maung, Ma Thein May, Esther, and Myat Htoon.<sup>19</sup> On April 6, 1907, the first church was organized with twenty-three members.<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly, some of the charter members were Herbert H. Votaw, Carolyn Harding Votaw, Daw May, U Maung Maung, Daw Thein May, Esther, Myat Htoon, Walter Martin, Arthur Isacke, Po Hla, and Chit Hla.<sup>21</sup>

## Yangon Central Church in 2017

The first church, organized on April 6, 1907, with twenty-three members, increased to about 1000 members by 2017. It took 110 years to reach a thousand members. It was known as Yangon Central church after land was purchased for additional churches in Kanbe (1948), Ahlone (1950), and Insein (1950). In North Okkalapa, a house was rented for worship in 1950. Five churches were organized in Greater Yangon City: Insein, Kanbe, North Okkalapa, North Dagon, Dagon Port Township (Yuzana). In 2017, the Yangon Attached District was mainly supported financially by YCC and is financially stronger than the other missions in Myanmar, which include the South East Mission, the Ayeyarwaddy Mission, and the Central Myanmar Mission. In 1997, YCC was awarded the fourth Prize in Beautification of the Church among the Asia-Pacific Division (now known as Southern Asia-Pacific Division and the Northern Asia-Pacific Division).<sup>22</sup>

## The Church's Good Location

In 1928, C. H. Mackett arrived from India and purchased land for mission headquarters and a church building which became Yangon Central church. Just a five-minute walk to the famous Shwe Dagon Pagoda and a ten-minute walk to downtown, it was an ideal location in a quiet cantonment area. When the church leaders approached the rich owner, he was willing to sell it to the church.<sup>23</sup>

The foundation of the church building was laid on August 10, 1928. It was completed on 28 January 28, 1929, and dedicated on January 31, 1929. It was officiated by A. W. Cormack, O. Montgomery, and N. Z. Town, leaders from the Southern Asia Division. The superintendent of Myanmar Mission was T. J. Michael and the treasurer was O. A. Asprey. The builder was Mr. Mackett. The design was the same as the church at Kolkata.<sup>24</sup>

The mission's buildings survived World War II, however, the church became a stable. All the records and pews were lost. Dr. Ohn, a lay leader, was responsible for the church's renewal after the war.

## Pastors and Attached District Administrators

H. H. Votaw (1905-1907); R. R. Cock (1907); J. M. Comer (1911-1912); George A. Hamilton (1912-1922, 1937); Isaac Counsell (1920-1923); R. A. Hubley (1924-1927); G. W. Pettit (1927-1932); W.W. Christensen (1932-1942); R. H. Woolsey (1960-1962); Maung Htwa (1966-1971); Brown Kia (1972-1974); Maung Sawt 1974-1979); Khin Mg Nyein (1977-1979); Hla Chit (1980-1983); Tember Chit (1984-1990); Samuel Po (1991-1992); Thein Shwe (1991-1992); Kyaw Sein Pe (1993-1995); Tember Chit (1996); K. H. Suanzanang, (1997-2002); Samuel Po, (2003-2004); Sonny Htain (2005-2006); Maung Maung Htay (2007-2010); Saw Keh (2011-2015); Khin Mg Yin (2016); Muller Taw (2017-).<sup>25</sup>

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12. J. O. Wilson, *Advent Angels in Burma* (N. p.: Friends of Burma, 1971), 25.
13. Ibid., 29.
14. Ibid., 22, 25-27.
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17. J. O. Wilson, *Advent Angels in Burma* (N. p.: Friends of Burma, 1971), 24-26.
18. Ibid., 31.
19. Pe Yee, *The Stories of Seventh-day Adventists in Myanmar*, 44.
20. Ibid., 532.
21. Ibid., 532, 192.
22. Ibid., 84.
23. Ibid., 203-204.
24. Ibid., 478.
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