Burundi Union Mission

NSABIYAREMYE JETHRON
Nsabiyaremye Jethron was president of Burundi Union Mission from 2012 to 2015.

Burundi Union Mission (BUM) is a part of the East-Central Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Its headquarters is in Kiriri, Bujumbura, Burundi, and it covers the country of Burundi.

Statistics, as of June 30, 2020: churches 478, membership 190,669, population 11,866,000.
Burundi Union Mission oversees the work in three sub-administrative entities organized in September 2002: East Burundi Mission, North Burundi Mission, and North West Burundi Mission. It also supervises the territory that will soon be officially organized as a mission with the name South West Burundi Mission, with headquarters located in Bujumbura, the capital city of Burundi.

That administrative entity of BUM covers the entire territory of Burundi and oversees the mission work in 18 provinces of the country, namely Bubanza, Bujumbura Mairie, Bujumbura Rural, Cankuzo, Cibitoke, Gitega, Kayanza, Karuzi, Kirundo, Makamba, Muramvya, Muyinga, Mwaro, Ngozi, Rumonge, Rutana, and Ruyigi.

**Origin of the Adventist Work in Burundi**

When the very first members were converted and baptized in the Kaburantwa River by Davis Elie Delhove in April 1928, after three years of missionary endeavor, a nucleus church was born with four baptized members. As the mission work grew, the local church evolved into a mission station, then into a field at the national level, and finally into the union mission which it is currently.

The growth of the work has been slow from the beginning. Traditional beliefs constituted obstacles that prevented Adventism from growing faster than it did. In addition, at the time of the entry of Adventism, the country was already heavily dominated by the Catholic Church and entry caused a stir in the established denomination. Consequently, Adventist evangelists were actively barred from evangelizing by both the chiefs and the early missionaries of other denominations. Other hindrances to mission work in Burundi from the beginning were a frequent change of leaders, a vacuum of leadership in crucial times, and a shortage of financial resources.

Just like other church administrative units in the Central African Union Mission (CAUM), Buganda Station suffered a shortage of financial resources. Even when this mission field was transferred from the European Division to the South African Division, budget problems continued to hinder the growth of the work. And yet, this region had a great potential and much was expected of it, as has been noticed by various authors.

For instance, in January 1933, C. W. Bozarth, CAUM president, wrote “Never have I seen people so eager to accept and follow the truth as they are in Ruanda-Urundi today.” This statement correlates with what Archbishop Andre Perraudin, speaking about Burundians, has called “naturaliter Christiana,” the predisposition of Burundian souls to receive and accept the gospel. In fact, according to him, “the Barundi were better prepared than many other Africans for the conversion.” He stated that the notion of God was lacking among them in a specific way, however, it was already very rich and lent itself well to receive the supplement brought by missionaries.

Socio-political events have also slowed down the mission work in Burundi. Those include crises of 1965, 1972, 1988, and 1993, which resulted in bloodshed and leading people to flee for their lives. The freedom of worshiping God in Burundi was curtailed when the government decided, in 1984, to close certain churches including the SDA Church. That resulted in the SDA Church’s decline, as it was forced to close all church programs and activities.

Rwanda and Urundi were politically joined under the same colonial master, Belgium. While the joined countries had the same headquarters located in Bujumbura (then Usumbura), Burundi (then Urundi) was joined to Rwanda to constitute one church administrative entity with the headquarters located at Gitwe, Rwanda. The joined church entity reported to Congo Rwanda-Urundi Union Mission with headquarters located in Lubumbashi (Elisabethville, then) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Congo). That union reported to the European Division until it was transferred to the South African Division with headquarters located in Pretoria, South Africa.

Based on this history, it took time for the Church in Burundi to stand on its own, and it has remained a disturbed and unstable field for many years. Its growth and progress have been jeopardized, delaying its opportunity to attain a union status.

**Growth**

From the time it was organized until now, the church membership of BUM has increased. According to the *Statistical Report*, BUM was organized in 2012 with a membership of 141,046 by the end of that year. At the end of December 2018, with a population of more than 10,438,000, BUM had a membership of 192,258, scattered in 500 organized churches and 502 companies.

The table below shows how membership was distributed across the various administrative entities of the country in 2020.

**Distribution of Adventist Church Membership Across the Provinces of Burundi**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MISSION</th>
<th>Nos</th>
<th>PROVINCES</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
<th>MEMBERSHIP</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Burundi Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Burundi Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West Burundi Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West Burundi Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above shows how membership was distributed across the various administrative entities of the country in 2020.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Growth Rate</th>
<th>District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>East Burundi</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cankuzo</td>
<td>349,824</td>
<td>5,528</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gitega</td>
<td>1,108,477</td>
<td>1,569</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Makamba</td>
<td>658,614</td>
<td>6,712</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mwaro</td>
<td>417,489</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rutana</td>
<td>509,756</td>
<td>4,718</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ruyigi</td>
<td>612,196</td>
<td>7,829</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Burundi</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Karusi</td>
<td>667,088</td>
<td>4,389</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kayanza</td>
<td>894,781</td>
<td>5,891</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kirundo</td>
<td>960,267</td>
<td>13,120</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Muyinga</td>
<td>966,615</td>
<td>10,909</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ngozi</td>
<td>1,009,882</td>
<td>5,511</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North West Burundi</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bubanza</td>
<td>516,656</td>
<td>13,793</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cibitoke</td>
<td>703,758</td>
<td>90,873</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South West Burundi</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bujumbura</td>
<td>710,458</td>
<td>7,436</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bururi</td>
<td>478,565</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mairie</td>
<td>759,900</td>
<td>9,057</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Muramvya</td>
<td>447,212</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rumonge</td>
<td>538,059</td>
<td>1,901</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12,309,600</td>
<td>185,389</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data in the table shows that at the end of December 2020, the general population was estimated to be 12,309,600. Out of that population, church membership has dropped to 185,389, which is 1.6 percent of the general population, compared to the membership of December 2018. When all available data is put together, the picture begins to emerge that, as far as Adventism is concerned, Burundi is still a mission field.

In fact, although Adventism is felt in every province, its presence is very low. In some provinces it is almost nonexistent (Bururi, Gitega, Karusi, Kayanza, Muramvya, Mwaro, Ngozi, Rumonge). Even in a province where there is a major portion of church membership (Cibitoke), the Adventist ratio of ten percent shows that there is still a way to go, because a large number of people are not yet reached by the Adventist message. It means that we still have corners, hills, centers of influence, and villages to reach out to with the gospel.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been in Burundi for nearly 100 years, but of 100 people you meet on the street, fewer than two will be Adventists. The Church in Burundi has evolved within a context of disturbances which prevented it from continual growth—including repetitive political unrest, discontinuity of church work, and other limiting forces.

**Organizational History**

Adventism in Burundi started from scratch, but the work and the membership continued to slowly grow. The mission station was situated at Buganda until 1936, when it was then transferred to Ndora, in the high mountains, for health reasons. In 1947 Burundi Mission was joined with Rwanda to form one administrative entity called the Ruanda-Urundi Field. This relationship continued with varying degrees of change until January 1960, when Congo acquired its independence.

The political crisis which erupted in Congo following the period of independence led to the organization of Ruanda-Urundi Union Mission in 1960, separating it from the Congo Rwanda-Urundi Union Mission, with headquarters located at Elisabethville (Luumbashi). With the independence of Congo, that headquarters was transferred to Bujumbura, Burundi. Thus, the church in the Ruanda-Urundi region came under the leadership of the Central African Union with its headquarters in Bujumbura. That led to the Church in Burundi being organized as a field with headquarters at Ndora. Three years later, in 1963, Burundi Field split into two administrative units along the main road running north from the capital, Bujumbura, to Kayanza, with one unit in the western part and the other in the eastern part of the country.

The eastern section was called East Burundi Field with headquarters in Gitega. It was administered directly from the CAUM office in Bujumbura until 1964, when it was organized as the East Burundi Field. The western unit was called West Burundi Field and contained the major portion of the church membership. Its headquarters was located at Ndora. In 1973 the headquarters of the Western Field was transferred from Ndora to Buganda, the birth place of Adventism in Burundi.

The development of the church structure in Burundi and the political context in which it existed have impacted the mission in Burundi. By 1963, before it was split into the two entities of Burundi field, CAUM had been renamed the Ruanda-Urundi Union Mission, comprising four fields, three of which were in Rwanda and one in Burundi, the West Burundi Field. In 1964 Burundi’s relations with neighboring Rwanda became frosty. Thus, the Ruanda-Urundi Union Mission was renamed the Central Africa Union, partly because the two nations had broken off diplomatic relations which necessitated a change of name. The headquarters continued to be based in Bujumbura and it was difficult for the Adventist Church to operate in both Rwanda and Burundi, since the two nations had broken off diplomatic relations.

In 1980 the Southern African Division was dissolved and replaced by the Africa-Indian Ocean Division (AID), which had been organized the same year. Part of the territory of the Southern African Division went to the Trans-Africa Division based in Harare, Zimbabwe, but CAUM became part of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division which was based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

**Toward Decentralization of the Work**

In 1979, DeWitt S. Williams, who had replaced Werner at CAUM, suggested reorganizing the work in Burundi into four fields. On August 21, 1980, a subcommittee chaired by Pastor E. Nyagatema and composed of four additional members—Pastors Ezechiel Munyenkiko, Silas Senkomo, T. K. Struntz, and Laban Biyayire—voted to request the CAUM Executive Committee to accept the report of the subcommittee on the division of the fields in Burundi as follows: West Burundi Field, North Burundi Field, East Burundi Field, and South Burundi Field.

These insightful ideas from church leadership have been spelled out by national church leaders and members many times, but in vain. On September 29, 1980, 18 Burundian pastors wrote to M. L. Mills, former Trans-Africa Division president, to underscore the need of the decentralization of the work in Burundi. On May 7, 1982, a similar letter was written and signed by 17 Burundian delegates while attending union session at Gitwe, in Rwanda. A similar request was formulated on December 24, 1982, by the CAUM Executive Committee members coming from Burundi and addressed to Robert J. Kloosterhuis, the Africa-India Ocean Division president.

None of those letters resulted in the requested action. Instead, when the suggestion of DeWitt S. Williams was still in process, AID dissolved CAUM and designated Burundi as an attached field under the division. Burundi was
separated from Rwanda in December 1983. The entire country was downgraded to mission field status and consequently the West Burundi and East Burundi Fields were dissolved.21

With the dissolution of CAUM, most Rwandese pastors returned to Rwanda. Their departure led Burundi to suffer a pastoral vacuum, since not many Burundians had received senior pastoral education to enable them to serve in higher capacities. Consequently, the work in Burundi has been slowed down by this fact and many others.

Constrained Socio-political Context

From 1947 to 1983, Burundi and Rwanda evolved together. In 1960 they ceased to be part of the Congo Rwanda-Urundi Union Mission and acquired their own union status: CAUM. Since CAUM was dissolved in 1983, Burundi, as an attached field to the division, has had to stand on its own, whereas its sister administrative entity in Rwanda has become a union. It is like Burundi had to start over from the beginning. Though the potential of growth was there, Burundi was evolving within a constrained socio-political context. There was often police violence and severe repression. Burundi as a country was internationally criticized by human rights groups for press censorship and religious suppression.20 All these factors led to the closure of denominational activities beginning in April 1984. This context prompted AID to dissolve CAUM and designate Burundi as an attached field under the division.

For three and a half years, the freedom to worship God in Burundi was denied. The crisis impacted pastors and church members. When the government of the Third Republic, led by Major Pierre Buyoya, restored freedom to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it returned church buildings and schools. AID quickly reorganized the church21 and its status became Burundi Association, an attached territory to the division.

Launching of Burundi Union Administrative Unit

The decentralization of the church work in Burundi, which was suggested in 1979 by Dewitt Williams, came into existence in 1999 with some amendments. After the church resumed its activities in 1988, church leaders and members remained concerned by the fact that Burundi was downgraded and, yet, it had the potential for growth. Finally, the geography of the country, the rapid growth of membership even during the period when the church was closed,22 and the increasing financial strength, led to the decentralization of the work.

However, with the death of Melchior Ndadaye (president of Burundi) in 1993 and the social crisis that resulted from it, progress ceased. Nevertheless, on September 26, 1999, a general assembly of the Burundi Attached Territory was convened and action no. 43/99 records that it was “Voted to recommend to AID to accept the reorganization of Burundi Association into three missions: North Burundi Mission, East Burundi Mission and West Burundi Mission.” The general assembly was chaired by Carlyle Bayne, with Nteziryayo Samuel as secretary, and Ndikubwayo Joseph as recording secretary.

On May 28, 2002, by action no. 02-272, AID voted to request the General Conference to study the upgrading of the Burundi Association to a union mission with responsibility for three missions in North Burundi, West Burundi, and East Burundi.24 The request was that the association would be renamed Burundi Union Administrative Unit and that the process would be finalized during the last quarter of 2002.

AID, by action no. 02-359, recorded and filed the request from the Burundi Association regarding officers for the three missions. It was voted that presidents and secretary-treasurers would be appointed for East Burundi Mission, North Burundi Mission, and West Burundi Mission. Hategekimana Samuel was appointed as East Burundi Mission president, with Nziguheba Jerome as secretary; Ngiriyumunyurwa Elazar was appointed as North Burundi president, with Havyaririana Elia as secretary; and Baranyiziğiye Uziel and Barute David were appointed respectively as West Burundi Mission president and secretary-treasurer.

These appointments became effective on September 9, 12, and 16, 2002, when Charles Montille and Carlyle Bayne5 came as AID representatives and reorganized the entire church in Burundi into three missions: Buganda, Gitega, and Ngozi. This reorganization was done with the understanding that these administrative units were to start functioning as a preparatory step to achieving union mission status. In his letter dated November 18, 2002, Charles Montille stated: “This being a peculiar situation, with the organization of three separate entities on the ground, Burundi should now be considered as a “Union in preparation.”25

Burundi Union Mission Status

When the Burundi Association was renamed as Burundi Union Administrative Unit (BUAU), it ceased to belong to AID. The General Conference Executive Committee had realigned church territory on the Africa continent. Part of the territory of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division which was based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and the Trans-Africa Division based in Harare, Zimbabwe, merged to become a new division, the East-Central Africa Division (ECD). With this realignment, Burundi became part of ECD. As a result, Charles Montille wrote to the administration of ECD in Nairobi, Kenya, on November 18, 2002, providing them with the information of the process that Burundi had gone through and the recommendation that ECD record the reorganization of the Burundi field into three missions.

With that information and recommendation, ECD sent a self-evaluation instrument to BUAU to be filled in and submitted. The submission of this instrument enabled ECD to reactivate the Burundi Mission status by action no.
The process for Burundi Association to achieve union mission status evolved as follows. AID organized the Burundi Association into three missions and recommended to the General Conference that it send a survey commission to assess the possibility of union status for Burundi. Next ECD voted to adopt the AID action in 2002 as per vote no. 02ECD-014. Consequentially, it was voted to reactivate action no. 02ECD-014 requesting the GC to send a survey commission to assess the possibility of union status for Burundi. Prior to that, the ECD executive committee would send a survey team for an on-site visit in BUAU and report the findings to the available ECD Executive Committee members in September 2002.

In its 2002 midyear meeting, the ECD Executive Committee, by action no. ECD 2002-025, set up an evaluation commission comprised of eight people, with Noah Kasereka Musema as survey commission chair and Adugna Paul Tegete as survey commission secretary. The evaluation commission was to determine whether the Burundi Association was ready for union status and then make a recommendation to the ECD Executive Committee.

On June 10, 2007, the evaluation commission arrived in Bujumbura and began the interviews and site visit. The following day, it visited associations, institutions, clinics, and churches. The evaluation commission analyzed the BA staff, the headquarters office, the office facilities, the staff houses, and the master plan of the premises. It also visited fields and institutions and analyzed their buildings, facilities, and programs.

The commission visited churches and visited with elders and church boards to determine the quality of church administration at the local church level. They also looked into church records and advised the union on how it could help local churches. On the evangelism and financial levels, the commission looked into plans for church growth and the evangelism master plan. They did a financial analysis regarding the level of self-support and future plans. The departmental interview occurred on June 12, 2007, and the BA Executive Committee was convened that afternoon.

The survey commission reported to the executive committee that Burundi was determined to stand tall, “forward ever, backward never,” in order to become and sustain union mission status. Consequentially, the ECD Executive Committee voted to accept the recommendation of the survey commission that Burundi Association be granted union mission status (02ECD 2008).

When ECD was established in 2003, the process for the Burundi attached territory to become a union was ongoing. Though it was felt that Burundi was to soon become a union, the process lasted another couple of years. When ECD received the visit of the AID that Burundi be upgraded to union status, it still needed to be sure Burundi had met all the requirements. Thus, ECD administrators took their time for guided orientation. Even with the concluding visit of the evaluation commission, in 2008, and after the action was taken, the administration decided to observe the territory a little longer. While under observation, Burundi continued to grow and that prompted ECD administration to present the request for union mission status to the General Conference.

Upon receiving the ECD request for the GC to change Burundi’s status to union mission, the GC set up a survey commission for Burundi. The commission was composed of Geoffrey Gabriel Mbwana, chair; Rosa Taylor Banks, secretary; other members included George Omolua Egwakhe, Israel Leito, and Billie Biaggi, plus division representation. Their task was to consider the merits of the proposal that was recently approved by the ECD Executive Committee and to make a site visit. The GC survey commission visited Burundi on August 1-7, 2012, to determine if Burundi was ready for union mission status.

Upon GC action to set up a survey commission to evaluate if Burundi was ready for union status, the GC process had just begun. In the meantime, local church leaders updated all required information that was needed and ECD Secretariat did everything to make sure that upon the arrival of the GC commission everything would be ready. Nathanael Walemba, ECD executive secretary, was present to help the local administration make the needed adjustments.

The members of the survey commission convened a briefing meeting on the evening of August 1, 2012, and they started their work the next day. They visited the West Burundi Mission, the North Burundi Mission, the East Burundi Mission, and the Lycee Maranatha of Kivoga. On Sabbath the members of the commission preached in various churches in the capital city of Bujumbura. They concluded their work on Sunday, August 6, 2012.

During the 2012 GC Annual Council, the mission status of the Burundi Union was discussed by the GC Executive Committee, following the report of the survey commission on Burundi, and the recommendation was approved by the committee.

Following the Annual Council action of the GC Executive Committee, ECD called a constituency meeting of the new Burundi Union Mission on March 2, 2013. ECD also organized the Burundi Union Administrative unit in a full union mission. The new Burundi Union Mission was presented at the 2015 GC Session for acceptance into the sisterhood of unions.

**List of Presidents of Burundi Union Mission**

SOURCES

AID Correspondences, 2002, Burundi Union Archives, Kiriri, Bujumbura, Burundi.
Burundi Association Minutes, 1999, Burundi Union Mission Archives, Kiriri, Bujumbura, Burundi.

NOTES

1. Letter by Charles Montille, associate secretary of former AID, dated on November 18, 2002, and sent to the administrators of East-Central Africa Division, informing them that those administrative units were to start functioning as preparatory step to mission status (East-Central Africa Division archives, Nairobi, Kenya).


3. The first four people baptized in Burundi were: Munyankiko Ezéchiel, Gaza Siméon, Deborah (a Rwandan woman whose husband was already an Adventist member), and Matsuri Job (the first Burundian baptized).


6. Archbishop Andre Perraudin was a Swiss Catholic clergyman who lived in Rwanda for nearly fifty years. He was Archbishop of Kabgayi from 1959 to 1989.


8. Until then, the European Division administered the European nations including their colonies.


13. Congo achieved independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960, under the name Republic of Congo.

14. Sang, "A Church Captured."

15. Ibid.


17. See the Central African Union Minute, March 21, 1980, Burundi Union Mission Archives.

18. Ibid.

19. Sang, "A Church Captured."

20. Ibid.

21. The AID appointed Silas Senkomo as the new president of the Burundi Mission. Mitsindo Rudatsikira was secretary and Gordon Gray was named treasurer.

22. While under the ban, the church continued to grow, baptisms taking place hidden from the public.


24. Ibid.

25. Carlyle Bane was then the Stewardship director of African and Ocean Indian Division.

26. Letter written by Charles Montille, associate secretary of former AID, dated November 18, 2002, and sent to ECD administrators, ECD Archives.

27. Other members of the commission were: Hudson Kibbuka (ECD Education director), Bernard Mambwe (Tanzania Union Mission executive secretary), John Wani (Uganda Union Mission president), Abel Habiyambere (Rwanda Union Mission treasurer), a lay member from East African Union, and a frontline pastor from East Congo Union Mission.